Written in Stone, Written on Hearts:

The Enduring Relevance of the Ten Commandments

Reed S. Rusniak

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Preface

We live in an age that has largely forgotten the God who gave His Law at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments, once the foundation of Western civilization and moral teaching, have in many places become little more than historical relics, dismissed as outdated restrictions or suggestions to be considered when convenient. Perhaps even more grievous, many professing believers in our time deny the Law any place in their Christian walk.

The church greatly needs to rediscover the perfection and relevance of God's holy Law. For the believer, the commandments are the gracious instruction of a loving Father, revealing God's character and marking out the path of true freedom. As the psalmist declares, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul" (Psalm 19:7a). When properly understood through the lens of grace, God's commandments become the Christian's rule of life, guiding us in sanctification and conforming us to the image of Christ. In the words of one Puritan author, “Though the moral law be not a Christ to justify us, it is a rule to instruct us.”

For the unbeliever, the Ten Commandments serve as a divine mirror, revealing sin. No one can stand before God's holy standard and claim innocence. The commandments strip away self-righteousness and expose our desperate need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, driving sinners to the cross where mercy and truth meet, where justice and grace come together.

Our present darkness will not be resolved by political solutions or human wisdom. What we need is a great spiritual awakening, a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit that turns hearts to the one true and living God. Such an awakening has historically begun when God's people rediscover His Word and prayer, His Law, and the Gospel. When we see God's holiness reflected in His commandments, we see both our sin and our Savior more clearly.

This book is offered with the prayer that it might serve both the believer seeking to walk more faithfully and the seeking soul who has not yet found peace with God. May it drive us to the One who perfectly kept every commandment on our behalf and now, by His grace, offers us His righteousness as a free gift. May a fresh encounter with God's holy Law lead us to worship the holy Lawgiver and to find our rest in the One who fulfilled all righteousness for the believer.

To the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Savior of sinners, be glory, honor, and praise.

Reed S. Rusniak
Carlisle, PA
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Introduction: The Law of God in a Lawless Age

Study

This introductory chapter sets the stage for our study of the Ten Commandments. We will examine their origin, the kind of law they are, and why they still matter to God's people today. Because mankind was created in the image of God, it is a moral being. The Ten Commandments, also called the Decalogue, were not invented by Moses or gradually developed by the Jewish people. God Himself spoke to them aloud from the top of Mount Sinai and then wrote them with His own finger on tablets of stone. They are not the product of human reasoning but the direct revelation of God's holy character and will. The Ten Commandments are the moral law of God given to all who are made in His image. These commandments will always be relevant and endure with us. Jesus Himself declared, "until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, nor a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18).

Our study looks at the three main uses of the commandments and explores the relationship between Law and grace in God's plan of redemption. The Ten Commandments are not presented as the way to be saved, but as the gracious instruction of a loving Father to His redeemed children. They are a rule of life that reflects His holiness and guides believers on the path of sanctification. We will also see how the Ten Commandments point us to the Lord Jesus Christ, showing us our deep need for the only One who ever kept them perfectly.

The Setting: Mount Sinai

The giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai is one of the most significant moments in all of Scripture. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. Generation after generation lived and died in bondage with no hope of deliverance. Yet God, in His great faithfulness, did not forget His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In His perfect timing, He raised up Moses and brought His people out of Egypt through a series of mighty acts: ten devastating plagues, the Passover lamb, and the parting of the Red Sea. Through these acts of sovereign grace and power, God redeemed Israel from bondage and brought them to Himself. Throughout the Word of God, this mighty act stands as a symbol of redemption for God's people from the bondage of their sin.

Exodus 19:1–2 tells us that "On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There, Israel encamped before the mountain." What happened next is one of the most staggering scenes in the entire Bible. God descended on Sinai in fire and smoke, accompanied by thunder, lightning, and a trumpet blast so loud that everyone in the camp trembled. The mountain itself shook. Moses climbed into the thick darkness where God was, and there the Lord spoke the Ten Commandments directly and later inscribed them on two tablets of stone with His own finger (Exodus 31:18).

The way God gave the commandments reveals something vital about their nature. These are not suggestions for our consideration. They are not the collected wisdom of an ethnic group, pieced together over centuries. They are the very words of the living God, spoken from heaven and given with an authority unlike any other portion of Scripture. No other part of the Bible was delivered this way. The prophets spoke the word of the Lord. The apostles wrote under the Spirit's inspiration. But the Ten Commandments alone were spoken audibly by God to an entire nation and then written by His own hand. We cannot overstate what that means for their authority and permanence.

Grace Before Law

Before we go further, we need to acknowledge a truth people often miss when considering God's law. The commandments were given to a people who had already been redeemed. God did not say to Israel, "Keep these commandments, and then I will deliver you." He delivered them first. He rescued them by His mighty arm, carried them through the sea on dry ground, and brought them safely to Sinai. Only then did He give them His law. The preface to the Decalogue makes this unmistakably clear: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Grace comes before law. Redemption comes before obedience. The order matters more than most people realize.

This is how God has always dealt with His people. He does not demand obedience as a condition of His love. He loves first, and then He calls for obedience as the fitting response to that love. The same pattern runs through the New Testament. We are not saved by keeping the law. That is

a common and deeply rooted error in human thinking. Something in our fallen nature quite naturally assumes that salvation must be earned, that we must somehow prove ourselves worthy of God's favor. But the gospel teaches us otherwise.

We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But having been saved, we are called to walk in obedience to God's commandments, not to earn His favor but because we already possess it. The night before He would go to the cross, Jesus told the disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The Apostle John also writes, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

The Reformer John Calvin captured this truth beautifully when he wrote in his preface to the Ten Commandments in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "He holds out the promise of grace to draw them by its sweetness to zeal for holiness."[1] The law, rightly understood, is not opposed to grace. It is the gift of grace, the instruction of a Father who has already rescued His children and now teaches them how to live as members of His household. When we forget this, we fall into one of two errors: either legalism, which treats the law as the way of earning God's favor, or antinomianism, which dismisses the law as irrelevant to the Christian life. Both errors are destructive, and the preface to the Decalogue guards against them both.

The Nature of the Moral Law

The Ten Commandments are what theologians call the moral law, as distinguished from the ceremonial law, which governed Israel's worship, and the civil or judicial law, which governed Israel's national life. While the ceremonial and civil laws have passed away with the coming of Christ and the end of Israel's theocratic government, the moral law remains binding on all people in every age. The Westminster Confession of Faith states this clearly: "The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who

[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.15.

gave it. Neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation."[2]

The moral law does not change because it reflects God's character, and God does not change. What was right and wrong at Sinai remains so in our day. What God hated then, He hates now. What He commanded then, He still commands. The commandments reveal who God is: holy, just, faithful, true, pure, and good. To study the commandments is to study the character of God Himself, and to obey them is to walk in His ways.

We should also recognize that the moral law was not new when God spoke it at Mount Sinai. The principles behind the Ten Commandments had been in effect since the very beginning of creation. Murder was wrong long before Sinai, as Cain's punishment makes clear (Genesis 4). Adultery was wrong before Sinai, as Joseph knew full well when he refused the advances of Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). Theft, lying, and covetousness were all recognized as sinful long before Moses ever set foot on that mountain. What God did at Sinai was take what had always been His moral will for the human race and give it a formal, written, permanent expression. The Apostle Paul confirms this when he writes that the Gentiles, "who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires," because "the work of the law is written on their hearts" (Romans 2:14–15). God's moral law is written into the very fabric of creation and pressed upon every human conscience.

The Three Uses of the Law

Reformed theology has traditionally identified three uses or purposes of the moral law, each of which is vital for understanding the commandments.

The first use is to restrain sin in society. Even people who do not know God are held in check by His moral law, whether through the voice of conscience, cultural influences shaped by God's truth, or civil laws rooted in moral principles. Without this restraining function, human depravity would run wild, and society would collapse into chaos. Paul speaks of this when he says that "the

[2] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 19.5.

law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane" (1 Timothy 1:9).

The second use is to convict of sin and drive sinners to Christ. This is what Paul means when he writes, “Through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). The law works like a mirror. It shows us who we really are in the sight of a holy God. When we hold ourselves up to God’s perfect standard, we see that we fall short in every area. We have not loved God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. The law strips away our excuses and shuts every mouth before God, leaving us nowhere to turn but the cross of Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it, “The law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24).

The third use of the law is to instruct the believer in how to live a life that pleases God. Calvin called this its “principal use” and it is the most central focus of this book. The person who has been justified by faith alone now genuinely wants to honor God. But how does he know what that looks like in practice? The moral law gives him the answer. It is the Christian’s rule of life. The Psalmist puts it beautifully: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97). And again, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

The believer who truly grasps the grace of God does not run from the law. He delights in it, for it marks the path his Redeemer walked while on earth and the path God has set before him. The Christian knows that the Law can never justify. Yet he also knows it is a map by which a redeemed sinner walks on the road of sanctification, always pointing him back to the character of the God who rescued him.

The Structure of the Commandments

The Ten Commandments have traditionally been divided into two tables. The first table, commandments one through four, deals with our duty toward God. That is His exclusive claim to our worship, the manner of our worship, the reverence due His name, and the sanctity of His day. The second table, commandments five through ten, addresses our duty toward our neighbor. This

is the honor of authority, the sanctity of life, the purity of marriage, the integrity of property, the truthfulness of speech, and the contentment of the heart.

Jesus confirmed this twofold structure when He was asked which commandment was the greatest. He replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Love for God and love for neighbor are the two great principles of the commandments, applying to every aspect of human life and conduct. To keep the commandments is to love, and to love is to keep the commandments.

The commandments also follow a deliberate order, moving from the most fundamental to the more particular. The First Commandment establishes God's exclusive right to our worship. The second governs how we worship. The third protects the honor of God's name. The fourth sanctifies our time. The fifth establishes the family's authority structure and, by extension, that of society as a whole. The sixth protects human life. The seventh protects the marriage covenant. The eighth protects property. The ninth protects truth. And the tenth, by prohibiting covetousness, reaches into the deepest recesses of the heart, revealing that God's law governs not only external actions but also our deepest desires. Taken together, they form a complete picture of what it means to live before God in holiness and love.

Christ and the Commandments

No study of the Ten Commandments is complete without understanding their relationship to Jesus Christ. Christ is the heart and center of all Scripture, and the commandments point to Him.

The commandments point us to the One who perfectly fulfilled the law on behalf of His people. He is the only human being who has ever kept every commandment without fail, in thought, word, and deed, from the first moment of His life to His death on the cross at Calvary. His perfect obedience, what theologians call His active obedience, is credited to all who believe in Him. The good news is that when God looks upon the believer, He sees the perfect righteousness of Christ credited to that believer's account. This is the glorious truth of justification by faith alone. We are not righteous because we have kept the commandments, for we have all broken

them. We are righteous because Christ kept them for us, and His righteousness is now ours through faith.

In addition, Christ bore the penalty of the law on behalf of His people. Every time one of God's commandments is broken, a just penalty follows, and the ultimate penalty for sin is death. On the cross, Christ took upon Himself the full weight of His people's guilt and endured the wrath of God that their sins deserved. This is what theologians call His passive obedience, His suffering and death in the place of sinners. The law demanded justice, and in Christ, justice was fully and finally satisfied. As the Apostle Paul writes, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Lastly, Christ sends His Holy Spirit to write the law on the hearts of believers, enabling them to obey from the inside out. The prophet Ezekiel foretold this: "And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezekiel 36:27). What the law demands but can never produce on its own, the Spirit of Christ freely supplies. The Christian life is not a life of striving in our own strength to keep an external code. It is a life empowered by the indwelling Spirit, who progressively conforms us to the image of Christ, the One who is the perfect embodiment of God's law.

Why Study the Ten Commandments?

In an age when many people have abandoned absolute moral standards, the study of the Ten Commandments is more urgent than ever. We live in a culture that celebrates personal autonomy and insists that every person has the right to define their own truth and morality. The tragic consequences of this philosophy and worldview are all around us: the collapse of the family, the devaluing of human life, truth reduced to personal opinion and individual circumstance, the spread of sexual immorality, and materialism pursued as though money could somehow fill the emptiness of the human soul. Against all of this, the Ten Commandments stand as God's unchanging word, declaring what is right and what is wrong, what honors God and what dishonors Him.

For the believer, a study of the commandments is a means of growth in grace and holiness. As we honestly examine each commandment, we see our own sin more clearly and find ourselves

driven again and again to the cross of Christ. We see the perfection of God's character reflected in His law, and we are drawn to worship Him with deeper reverence and love. We discover the path of true freedom, for as Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

For the unbeliever, the commandments serve as a faithful witness to the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. They shut every mouth and expose every excuse. No one can stand before the Ten Commandments and claim to be righteous in God's sight. But this is not a message that should end in despair. It is a message of hope, for the same God who gave the law also gave His beloved Son. The law that condemns the sinner points him to the Savior who bore that condemnation in his place. The goal of the law is always Christ (Romans 10:4), and the end of every commandment, rightly understood, is the Gospel.

It is the prayer of this author that the following chapters will serve the Church of Jesus Christ by bringing God's holy law before His people with clarity, reverence, and warmth. May the Holy Spirit use these studies to deepen our love for God, to sharpen our hatred of sin, to magnify our gratitude for the Gospel, and to strengthen our resolve to walk in the way of holiness, all for the glory of the One who has redeemed us by His precious blood.

"Let your mercy come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight" (Psalm 119:77).

The First Commandment

Exodus 20:3

Study

This chapter examines the First Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:3, which establishes the foundation of all true worship by commanding exclusive devotion to the one true God. The commandment declares, "You shall have no other gods before me," setting forth God's rightful claim to supreme allegiance from His covenant people. Throughout Scripture, God reveals Himself as the only true and living God, distinct from the false deities of the surrounding nations. The First Commandment addresses not merely intellectual acknowledgment of God's existence but the heart's devotion, calling for complete loyalty, trust, and worship directed solely to the triune God.

This study explores the theological significance of God's exclusive claim to worship, examines historical violations of this commandment in Israel's experience, and considers various forms of idolatry that continue to threaten God's people today. The commandment reveals God's character as a jealous[3] God who will share His glory with no other and demands undivided love and allegiance. For the Church, this commandment remains foundational, calling believers to examine their hearts for any competing loyalties that would usurp God's rightful place as the supreme object of worship and affection.

Introduction

The Ten Commandments begin with a declaration of God's identity and His gracious deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Exodus 20:2 states, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This preface sets the context for all that follows. God's subsequent commands flow from His gracious covenant with His people. He is their Creator, Redeemer, and Deliverer, and therefore He has the right to command their complete allegiance. The Law’s preface reminds us that the commandments are a gift of grace, given to a people already redeemed, and that obedience should flow from grateful love rather

[3] The Hebrew word *qanna*, translated as jealous, describes God's righteous zeal for His own honor and His exclusive claim on the worship and devotion that belong to Him alone. Unlike human jealousy rooted in insecurity, God's jealousy flows from His holiness and His covenant relationship with His people, whom He will not allow to be drawn away to false gods that cannot save.

than fear. The Reformer John Calvin succinctly summarizes the preface by writing, “He holds out the promise of grace to draw them by its sweetness to zeal for holiness.”[4]

Immediately following this declaration is the First Commandment, found in verse 20:3, "You shall have no other gods before me." These words are concise yet comprehensive. They establish the most fundamental principle of true religion, namely that the one true God, revealed to us as three persons, alone deserves and demands the worship of His people. All other commandments are built upon this foundation. If we fail here, all else crumbles.

The First Commandment is not just a prohibition against polytheism, though it certainly includes that. It is a positive declaration of God's exclusive claim to our worship, love, trust, and obedience. It demands that God occupy the supreme place in our hearts and lives. Nothing and no one should rival Him for our affection and devotion. As our Creator and Redeemer, He alone is worthy of such allegiance.

Throughout Israel's history, the violation of this commandment proved to be one of its most persistent and destructive sins. Despite witnessing God's mighty acts of deliverance and experiencing His covenant faithfulness, the people repeatedly turned to false gods. The prophets spoke with great passion against this betrayal, calling it spiritual adultery. The New Testament likewise warns believers against idolatry in its many forms. The First Commandment remains as relevant and necessary today as when it was first given at Mount Sinai.

The Meaning of the Commandment

When God says, "You shall have no other gods before me," what exactly does He mean? The Hebrew phrase translated "before me" literally means "before my face" or "in my presence." Some have interpreted this to mean that we should not place other gods ahead of the true God, as if we might have multiple gods but must give the true God first place. However, this interpretation falls far short of the commandment's intent.

The commandment is absolute in its exclusivity. God is not asking for first place among many gods. He is declaring that there are no other gods, and therefore we must worship Him alone. The phrase "before me" underscores that, in light of God's omnipresence, we must not acknowledge

[4]John Calvin, *Institutes*,2.8.13

or worship any other deity. Given that God is omnipresent, we must never, anywhere, give allegiance to false gods.

Sinclair Ferguson provides a helpful comment. He writes, “The first commandment is absolute in its exclusivity. God is not asking for first place among many gods. He is declaring that there are no other gods, and therefore, we must worship Him alone.”[5] The phrase "before me" emphasizes that in God's omnipresence, we must not acknowledge or worship any other deity. As Dr. Ferguson explains, "the Hebrew expression is more forceful. It means, literally, 'before my face,' and the words 'you shall have no other gods before me' do not imply that they can be tolerated so long as they have a lower priority."[6]

The Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 46 asks, "What is required in the first commandment?" The answer states, "The first commandment requireth us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly."[7] This answer captures the positive dimension of the commandment. We are not merely to avoid false gods but to actively worship, love, trust, and glorify the one true God.

Question 47 asks, "What is forbidden in the first commandment?" The answer is, "The first commandment forbiddeth the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God as God, and our God: and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due to him alone."[8] The commandment has both negative and positive aspects. We must reject all false worship while embracing the true worship of the eternal God revealed in Holy Scripture.

The Nature of True Worship

The First Commandment concerns itself primarily with the object of worship. Who receives our devotion? To whom do we look for salvation, provision, and security? These are questions of ultimate allegiance. True worship must be directed to the one true God, the God who has

[5] Sinclair Ferguson, "The First and Most Broken Commandment," Desiring God, October 5, 2023, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-first-and-most-broken-commandment.
[6] Ibid.
[7] *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), Q. 46.
[8] *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), Q. 47.

revealed Himself in Scripture, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This worship must spring from the heart. God is not satisfied with external conformity when the heart wanders to other matters. The Lord Jesus Christ made this clear in His confrontation with the Pharisees. Quoting Isaiah, He said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Matthew 15:8). Authentic worship involves the whole person, including the mind, will, and affections, all directed toward God in loving adoration and trust.

True worship recognizes God's attributes and responds appropriately to them. We worship God because He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. We worship Him because He is the Creator of all things and the sovereign Ruler over all. We worship Him because He is our Redeemer who has loved us with an everlasting love and brought us into a relationship with Himself through the Lord Jesus Christ. The Puritan Thomas Watson expresses why we must have God as our God. He writes, “To acknowledge him to be God, is to believe that he is; and that he is such a one as he has described himself to be in his word: 'glorious in holiness, fearful in praises."[9]

The great prayer of Judaism (known as the Shema) in Deuteronomy 6:4–5 expresses the heart of the First Commandment: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." When the Lord Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, He quoted these very words (Matthew 22:37–38). Loving God supremely, with our entire being, is the essence of keeping the First Commandment. This is, in fact, the greatest commandment. Yet while we know we can never fulfill it perfectly, we rejoice in the One who has, Jesus Christ, our faithful representative.

Israel's Violation of the First Commandment

The sad reality of Israel's history is that it repeatedly violated the first of God's commandments. Even as Moses remained on Mount Sinai receiving the Law, the people persuaded Aaron to fashion a golden calf. They declared, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of

[9] Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, reprint ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 50.

the land of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:4). How quickly they forgot the mighty acts of the gracious and true God who had delivered them!

This pattern continued throughout the period of the Judges. The book of Judges records a recurring cycle of apostasy, oppressive judgment, repentance, and deliverance. Time and again, the Israelites turned to the Baals and Ashtoreths of the Canaanites. Judges 2:11-12 summarizes the problem, "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the false gods of the peoples who were around them and bowed down to them."

Even during the monarchy of the kings of Israel, idolatry plagued God's people. Solomon himself, despite his great wisdom, was led astray by his foreign wives, who turned his heart toward other gods (1 Kings 11:4). After the kingdom was divided, Jeroboam set up golden calves at Bethel and Dan, leading the northern kingdom into persistent idolatry. The kings who followed him were measured by whether they continued in "the sins of Jeroboam" or turned away from them. How accurate are the words of Jeremiah 17:9 for the people of Israel of the Old Covenant and humanity today? "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

The prophets repeatedly confronted Israel and Judah regarding their idolatry. Jeremiah lamented, "Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit" (Jeremiah 2:11). Hosea portrayed Israel's unfaithfulness as spiritual adultery, using his own marriage to an unfaithful woman as a living illustration of God's relationship with His wayward people.

Ultimately, Israel's persistent idolatry led to its exile as God's judgment. The northern kingdom fell to Assyria in 722 B.C., and the southern kingdom was conquered by Babylon in 586 B.C. Second Kings 17:7-8 explains why God's judgment was upon His people. "And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of

Israel." The violation of the First Commandment brought devastating consequences upon God's covenant people.

The Foolishness of Idolatry

Scripture not only condemns idolatry but also exposes its great foolishness. The prophets mocked the absurdity of worshipping gods made by human hands. Isaiah 44:9,20 provides a devastating critique of idol worship. The prophet describes a man who cuts down a tree, uses part of it for fuel to warm himself and bake bread, and then carves the rest into a god before which he bows in worship. In Isaiah 44:20, the prophet writes, "He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'"

Psalm 115:4-8 declares, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell; they have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them." The psalmist's point is clear. Idols are powerless, lifeless, and worthless. Those who worship them become spiritually blind, deaf, and dead like the objects of their devotion.

In contrast to these lifeless idols, the true and living God is presented in all His majesty and power. He is the Creator of heaven and earth. He spoke, and the worlds came into being. He sustains all things by the word of His power. He hears the prayers of His people and acts on their behalf. He is worthy of all worship, honor, and praise. To turn from such a God to lifeless idols is the height of folly and spiritual blindness.

Jeremiah 10:10,12 contrasts the true God with false gods, saying, "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath, the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation. It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens." There is no comparison between the Creator and His creation, between the living God and dead idols. This clear evidence shows that man is in desperate need of God's grace! As he often does, Calvin gets to the heart of the matter: "It is an invention of the devil that man should fashion a god instead of seeking the one who has revealed Himself. Men bring upon themselves all the calamities that

befall them by their own vanity in not being content with the one true God but wishing to have visible figures."[10]

Forms of Idolatry Today

While we may not be tempted to bow before statues of Baal or Asherah, the First Commandment remains powerfully relevant for believers today. Martin Luther wisely observed, "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God."[11] Idolatry takes many subtle forms in contemporary society. An idol is anything that takes the place of God in our hearts, anything that receives the love, trust, and devotion that belongs to Him alone.

John Calvin wrote, "The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols."[12] We are by nature prone to create gods in our own image, to fashion deities that serve our purposes and desires. Even religious people can be guilty of idolatry if they worship a god of their own making rather than the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture.

Material wealth can become an idol. The Lord Jesus warned, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24). When money becomes our security, when the pursuit of wealth consumes our thoughts and energies, when we trust in riches rather than in God, we have violated the First Commandment.

Personal relationships can become idolatrous. While God has given us the blessings of family and friendship, these good gifts must not replace God from His rightful place in our affections. Even our children, precious as they are, must not receive the supreme devotion that belongs to God alone. Jesus said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

Success, recognition, and the praise of others can become idols. When our sense of worth depends upon the approval of people rather than the approval of God, when we shape our lives to

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[10] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 265.
[11] Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.
[12] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.8.

gain human applause rather than to please our Maker, we have bowed before a false god. The apostle Paul asked, "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

Even our own desires and preferences can become idols. When self sits on the throne of the heart, when we make decisions based solely on what we want rather than what God commands, when we live for our own comfort and pleasure rather than for God's glory, we practice a subtle but deadly form of idolatry. The apostle Paul spoke of those "whose god is their belly" (Philippians 3:19), referring to those who live for the satisfaction of fleshly appetites.

Perhaps most dangerously, we can create false ideas about God Himself and worship a deity of our own imagination rather than the God of Scripture. When we pick and choose which of God's attributes we will acknowledge, when we reject aspects of His character that offend us, when we fashion a god more comfortable to our sensibilities, we violate the First Commandment. We must worship God as He has revealed Himself, not as we would prefer Him to be.

God's Rightful Claim

Why does God demand exclusive worship? Such a question reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of God's nature and our relationship to Him. God demands exclusive worship because He alone is God, and it is simply right and fitting that we acknowledge this reality.

God is our Creator. We owe our very existence to Him. "Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Psalm 100:3). As our Maker, God has absolute rights over us. We belong to Him by the fundamental fact of creation. To worship another is to deny this basic truth and to rebel against our Creator. John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, summarizes what we owe to God as a result of the first commandment using four headings. He writes, “Even though there are innumerable things that we owe God, yet they can be conveniently grouped in four headings: (1) adoration, (2) trust, (3) invocation, (4) thanksgiving.”[13]

[13] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22.

God is our Redeemer. For those in Christ, we have been bought with a price, the precious blood of the Son of God. Paul writes, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Christ's redemptive work establishes a stronger claim on our lives. We who were slaves to sin have been purchased and set free to serve our new Master. Allegiance to any other lord is unthinkable.

God is infinitely worthy of worship. His perfections are limitless. His glory is beyond measure. His goodness, mercy, and faithfulness are forever. When we consider who God is, the only appropriate response is worship. The four living creatures before God's throne cry out day and night, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8). God's intrinsic worth demands our complete devotion.

In addition, God's demand for exclusive worship is for our own good. He knows that divided loyalties destroy us. He knows that false gods cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. He knows that we were made for fellowship with Him and that we will never find rest or fulfillment apart from Him. Augustine's famous words ring true: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find rest in you."[14]

The Jealousy of God

In giving the Second Commandment, God describes Himself as "a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). This same attribute reinforces the First Commandment as well. God's jealousy is not like human jealousy, which is often petty, selfish, and sinful. Divine jealousy is the appropriate zeal of a holy God for His own honor and the exclusive devotion of His redeemed people.

God's jealousy is like the jealousy of a faithful husband whose wife has committed adultery. It is right and proper for a husband to desire the exclusive affection and faithfulness of his wife. It is right for him to be grieved and angered when she gives herself to another. In the same way, God has entered into a covenant relationship with His people. He is perfect in His faithfulness to us and requires our faithfulness in return.

The prophet Hosea illustrates this truth through his marriage to the unfaithful Gomer. God commanded Hosea to marry a woman who would prove unfaithful, mirroring Israel's spiritual

[14] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

adultery. Yet even in Gomer’s unfaithfulness, God's love pursued her and brought her back. The message is clear: God will not share His people with other gods. His love is jealous, demanding complete loyalty.

Exodus 34:14 declares, "For you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God." This is not a character flaw but an essential aspect of God's holiness. He will not allow His glory to be given to another. He will not tolerate rivals for the affection of His people. His jealousy is the jealousy of holy love, seeking the highest good of His redeemed by calling them to exclusive devotion to the only One who can truly satisfy their souls.

The Promise of God's Presence

While the First Commandment carries serious warnings for those who turn to other gods, it also contains implicit promises for those who worship the Lord faithfully. When we give God His rightful place in our lives, we experience the blessing of a close relationship.

God promises to be our God. This covenant relationship brings innumerable blessings. We have access to His throne of grace. We can call upon Him in prayer with confidence that He hears us. We have the assurance of His providential care over every aspect of our lives. We know that nothing can separate us from His love. These privileges are reserved for those who worship Him alone.

Jesus promised, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Purity of heart includes having no divided loyalties, worshipping God alone with sincere devotion. Those who do so are promised the supreme blessing of seeing God, of knowing Him intimately, of experiencing His presence in ever increasing measure. This is the inheritance of those who keep the First Commandment.

In addition, when we worship God rightly, we find the satisfaction and joy for which our hearts were created. The psalmist declared, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). The pursuit of false gods always leads to emptiness and disappointment. Only in the true and living God do we find lasting fulfillment. Only in worshipping Him do we discover what we were created for and why we exist.

Application for the Church Today

How then should we apply the First Commandment to our lives as Christians in the twenty-first century? We must begin by examining our hearts honestly before God. What occupies the supreme place in our affections? What do we think about most? What do we pursue with the greatest energy and passion? To what or whom do we look for our security, significance, and satisfaction?

We must ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any idols that have taken root in our hearts. Because of remaining sin, we are often blind to our own idolatry. We divide our loyalties and make excuses for our misplaced affections. We need God's light to expose what we prefer to keep hidden. The psalmist prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139:23-24).

When the Spirit reveals our idols, we must repent. True repentance involves more than feeling sorry for our sin. It means turning away from the idol and turning back to God with our whole heart. It means confessing our unfaithfulness and renewing our commitment to love and serve God alone. First John 1:9 assures us, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

We must cultivate a deeper love for God. Often our hearts wander because we do not know God as we should. We must devote ourselves to the study of Scripture, to prayer, to worship, and to meditation on God's character and works. As we behold His glory, our affections will be drawn to Him. As we taste His goodness, we will desire Him more than any earthly pleasure. As we experience His faithfulness, we will trust Him more fully.

We must also guard against the subtle idolatries that constantly threaten us. We live in a world that aggressively promotes false gods. The culture around us worships success, pleasure, beauty, and power. Even within the church, we can be tempted to worship programs, personalities, or preferences rather than God Himself. We must remain alert, continually returning our hearts to the supreme allegiance we owe to God alone.

Finally, we must remember that keeping the First Commandment is not ultimately about our effort but about God's grace at work in us. Apart from Christ, we cannot love God as we ought.

Our hearts are too corrupted by sin. But through faith in Jesus Christ, we are united to Him and the Holy Spirit works within us to transform our desires. He enables us to love what we once hated and to hate what we once loved. He gives us the power to worship God truly.

Conclusion

The First Commandment stands at the foundation of all true religion. It establishes the most basic principle of the spiritual life, that we must worship the one true God alone, giving Him the supreme place in our hearts and lives. This commandment flows from God's character as the Creator and Redeemer who alone deserves our worship. It reflects His covenant relationship with His people, a relationship that demands exclusive loyalty and affection.

Throughout history, the violation of this commandment has brought devastating consequences. Israel's repeated turning to false gods resulted in spiritual decline, moral corruption, and ultimately exile from the Promised Land. The prophets consistently identified idolatry as the root of the nation's troubles and called the people to return to the Lord with undivided hearts.

For the Church today, the First Commandment calls us to examine our hearts carefully for any competing loyalties. While we may not be tempted to worship carved images, we face countless subtle forms of idolatry. Money, relationships, success, pleasure, and even our own desires can usurp God's rightful place in our affections.

The commandment carries both a warning and a promise. Those who turn to other gods face God's righteous judgment. His jealousy for His own glory and the faithfulness of His people will not allow idolatry to go unpunished. Yet for those who love and worship God alone, there are blessings beyond measure.

Ultimately, the First Commandment points us to Jesus Christ. He perfectly loved and obeyed the Father, giving Him exclusive worship and devotion throughout His earthly life. Through His life, death, and resurrection, He has made it possible for us to enter into a saving relationship with God. By His Spirit at work in us, we can grow in our desire to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. May we, by His grace, keep this first and greatest commandment, worshipping the Lord our God alone, for His glory and for the eternal good of our souls.

"Put false ways far from me and graciously teach me your law" (Psalm 119:29).

The Second Commandment

Exodus 20:4-6

Study

This chapter examines the Second Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:4-6, emphasizing the mode of worship rather than merely the object of worship. While the First Commandment requires exclusive worship of the one true God, the Second Commandment concerns the proper and acceptable manner of worshiping God. Throughout Israel's history, the misuse of images in worship proved to be a persistent and besetting sin. God's prohibition against graven images stems from His jealous zeal for proper worship, the inherent dishonor that images bring to His glory, and their tendency to mislead people into false conceptions of the true God. The commandment includes both a severe warning against those who practice idolatry and a gracious promise of covenant love to those who worship according to His revealed will. This study considers the theological foundations of the commandment, its historical context in Israel, and its continuing relevance for the Church today in both public and private worship.

Introduction

The First Commandment is brief but all-encompassing: "You shall have no other gods before me." It emphasizes the importance of worshipping the one true God and prohibits the worship of false gods. When we turn to the Second Commandment, God's emphasis differs. The Second Commandment still concerns worshipping the one true God, but its focus changes from that of the First Commandment.

In the Second Commandment, worship is still central. However, now the emphasis is on worshipping God correctly and in a manner that is acceptable to Him. In other words, God is concerned not only that He is the object of our worship but also concerned that He is worshipped in the correct manner. These are two distinct commandments in verses 3 through 6 of Exodus 20.

My purpose for mentioning that is because historically, in the Church, particularly in Lutheran and Roman Catholic teaching, the first commandment in Exodus 20:3 is combined with the second commandment found in verses 4-6. That, however, is not appropriate as there are two distinct commands with two distinct objectives. In his book on the Ten Commandments, Thomas

Watson wrote, “In the first commandment, worshipping a false god is forbidden; in the second commandment, falsely worshipping the true God is forbidden.”

In summary, the second commandment underscores the importance of worshiping God according to His revealed will. Throughout Israel's history, this was a major besetting sin. In fact, in Exodus 32, the people of Israel fell into the sin of creating idols.

Israel’s Early Violation

Exodus 32 recounts the troubling account of the golden calf. Moses did not immediately descend from the mountain. The nation of Israel grew anxious and, as was their habit, began to complain. In Exodus 32:1-6, we read that Aaron fashioned a golden calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

We should notice that Israel did not want to replace Jehovah completely. They wanted something that represented Him. This is what the Second Commandment absolutely forbids. Something in the fallen human heart needs to picture God, physically or mentally, in a way that is understandable. Yet God only accepts worship in the manner He prescribes in His Word. True worship comes from the heart. In fact, Jesus Himself affirms this truth in John 4:24, where He declares, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Sinful man by nature does not want to live by faith. He has the need for and a desire for God, because God created mankind that way, but sinful man often turns to false representations of God. In other words, in the language of Romans 1:25, “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

God has made man differently from all His other creatures. Man was made in the image of God and created to worship the Creator. The sinful heart dims that image, but it can never fully be taken away. Since we were made to know and love God, there is a certain emptiness in a person who doesn’t worship their Creator. We were made by God and for God, and nothing else will satisfy us until we have “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”[15]

[15] Romans 5:1

The Sin of Jeroboam

The problem of using images plagued Israel throughout much of its history. It was a topic the prophets of God repeatedly raised, urging repentance. After Solomon's time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Jeroboam became King of the ten tribes of Israel, and Rehoboam became king of Judah.

Scripture teaches us that Jeroboam's sins became a mark by which other kings were measured. When evaluating other kings, one question was whether they forsook Jeroboam's sins or continued his sins. First Kings 12:25-33 records that Jeroboam was concerned that the people's hearts would turn away from him if they went to the temple for worship. As a result, he set up two golden calves in convenient locations. By establishing these images, the King introduced a new form of worship.

In Exodus 32:4, after making the golden calf, the people were told, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." In 1 Kings 12:28, after the two golden calves were made, Jeroboam said to the people, "Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." These and other passages in the Old Testament reveal that throughout Israel's history, making images was a persistent and besetting sin.

The Commandment Examined

Exodus 20:4-6 reads, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

We should notice the number of words in the Second Commandment. Perhaps the length implies the importance of worshipping God in a way that honors Him. It is, in fact, the longest of God's Ten Commandments, with one exception. The Fourth Commandment to "remember the Sabbath" is slightly longer than the Second Commandment.

God could have been brief, like He is in many commandments. God could have said, “You shall not make any images,” but He expands significantly on the commandment. I would suggest He did so for our own good. Many of the commandments are very brief: “You shall not murder.” “You shall not commit adultery.” “You shall not steal.” Yet when it comes to representing God in worship, God elaborates on His command.

Ultimately, how we worship and our thoughts about God are extremely important. J.I. Packer, writing on this topic, says: "Those who hold themselves free to think of God as they like are breaking the second commandment. We were made in his image, but we must not think of him as existing in ours."[16] Wrong conceptions of God and false worship lead to spiritual death. In Exodus 20:4-6, we will consider four parts of the commandment: The Rule, the Reason, the Warning, and the Promise.

The Rule

The Rule is simple: do not make any idols. The King James Version renders it, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” The writer of Leviticus reiterates the command in Leviticus 26:1, “Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the LORD your God.”

A graven image, or an idol, was simply something crafted by a tool. It might have been wood, chiseled out of stone, or even metal. Regardless of the material used by the maker, the intention of having the image was, in some manner, to represent God. God’s command was plain: do not make them. Yet the Scripture record shows that many in Israel did just that.

In fact, the archaeological record shows this as well. Recently, I had the opportunity to view an exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls. If you are not familiar with the Dead Sea Scrolls, they are a collection of over 900 ancient texts written on scrolls, most of which are scriptural, discovered in 1946 in caves in Israel. Most of the texts are written in Hebrew and Aramaic.

Alongside the scrolls, the exhibit featured several archaeological objects unearthed in ancient Israel. One of the objects consistently found in Israel was a small statue, approximately 2 inches

[16] J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 42.

tall. Archaeologists found more than 2,000 of them in various homes in ancient Israel. Those who found these figurines claim they were used as household goddesses or in worship. Now, is that accurate? I don't think we can say for sure. What we do know, however, for sure is that Israel struggled with the sinful, idolatrous practices of the neighboring Canaanite peoples. These are the same people whom God instructed Israel to destroy.

God's rule in verse 4 for not making an idol is all-encompassing. Nothing found in the sky, the earth, or the sea should be used as an image of God. Quite simply, God is saying that nothing in His Creation can represent Him. That is because the Creator is greater than all His creations.

Why Images Are Wrong

Along with the rule itself, God gives us His reasons for it. Exodus 20:4 declares, "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God." God forbids idolatry, in part, because of His jealousy. The Westminster Larger Catechism Question 110 addresses the reasons attached to the second commandment. It states: "What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it?" The answer is: ″The reasons, drawn from Exodus 20:5-6, highlight God's sovereignty and ownership over us, his intense zeal for proper worship, and his wrath against false worship as spiritual adultery. Violators are seen as haters of God, facing punishment across generations, while obedient lovers of God receive mercy for thousands of generations."

Like a husband and wife in a very exclusive relationship with one another that no one else can ever have, God demands exclusive worship from humanity in the manner He commands. He is jealous for it, but not in the sense most people today think of jealousy. Today, jealousy has a negative connotation. In this context, a suitable substitute for the word might be zeal or zealousness. In other words, God has a strong zeal for the exclusive worship of His people.

Images dishonor God. They diminish the glory God deserves. Any likeness of things in heaven, on earth, or in the sea is not a likeness of God. John Calvin, commenting on the Second Commandment, writes, "A true image of God is not to be found in all the world, and hence His glory is defiled and His truth corrupted by the lie whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form. Therefore, devising any image of God is impious because by this corruption, His majesty is adulterated, and He is figured to be other than He is."

When we think about it, how arrogant it is for sinful mankind to believe that anything they create can in any way represent the eternal God. We may think it strange in our culture, but it is not uncommon in the ancient world and perhaps in some cultures today. One classic example of worship given to physical objects is found in some forms of Hinduism. It is estimated that Hinduism is practiced by over 1.2 billion people, mainly in India, and involves widespread idol worship (known as murti puja) of deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and Ganesh in temples and homes. Devotees offer incense, food, and prayers to these statues, viewing them as conduits for a divine presence. There is a desperate need for the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In summary, idolatry clearly dishonors God, and in contrast, God's honor is fulfilled by obedience to the Second Commandment.

Images in worship terribly mislead people. They are deceitful lies promoted by the evil one. They create false ideas about God. It is a tactic of the enemy of our souls to represent God falsely. Wasn't that his tactic towards Eve in the garden? The devil wanted Eve to think incorrectly of God. That is what images in worship do.

Satan said to Eve in the Garden, "Did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" Satan is a liar and is always trying to represent God as something He is not. It is an old trick. No doubt the devil loves to see mankind create false images of God. That is also why we need the light of God's revelation in the inerrant and God-breathed Holy Scriptures.

J.I. Packer examines the Second Commandment in his book *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Regarding images that mislead people, Dr. Packer explains, "If the human mind is set up as the measure and test of truth, it will quickly substitute for man's incomprehensible Creator a comprehensible idol fashioned in man's own image."[17] We must never underestimate the remaining sin nature or the enemy of our souls who tempts us to sin.

Isaiah chapter 44:9-20 shows that not only does idolatry dishonor and mislead men, but it also shows how foolish and sinful fallen mankind really is. In clear language, the prophet expresses the foolishness of an idol and makes a mockery of those who practice idolatry. Speaking of a man who cuts down a tree, Isaiah mockingly writes, "He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a

[17] J.I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 171.

cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it, He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!" (Isaiah 44:14-17) What foolishness!

Other prophets also ridicule images. In Jeremiah 10:5, the prophet calls idols "scarecrows in a cucumber field." He says they cannot speak; they must be carried, for they cannot walk." The prophet emphasizes how foolish it is to think they can fashion an image of the eternal God! Over and over, the prophets of God ridicule the idols of their day, showing how utterly absurd it is to use them as a tool for worship. At the same time, they point the people to the greatness and majesty of the true God.

The Warning

In the Second Commandment, God also gives a serious warning. Since God is a jealous God, desirous and deserving of exclusive worship, He warns those who refuse to obey. Exodus 20:5 states, "For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." It is very strong and sobering language. In fact, verse 5 indicates that for those who practice idolatry, God views them as those who "hate him."

The Puritan Thomas Watson explains how we should properly conceive of God. He writes, "We must conceive god spiritually. (1). In his attributes, his holiness, justice, goodness, which are all the beams by which his divine nature shines forth. (2) We must conceive of him as he is in Christ. Christ is the 'image of the invisible God' as in the wax we see the print of the seal. Set the eyes of your faith on Christ-God-man. 'He that has seen me has seen the Father'" (John 14:9).[18] The Psalmist provides a warning for those who seek after other gods. He writes," The

[18] Watson, *Ten Commandments*, 62.

sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips (Psalm 16:4).

Verse 5 has been and can be somewhat difficult to understand. Is God saying that the children of those who worship images will be punished for the sins of their fathers? To answer, we do well to look at other portions of Scripture. As an example, the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 18:20 states, "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father the iniquity of the son." The prophet Jeremiah seems to express the same sentiment as Ezekiel. He does so in the context of teaching on the coming of the New Covenant, in which he declares regarding God's people, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

In Jeremiah 31:27-30, we find these words: "Everyone shall die for his own iniquity." This is confirmed even in the law of God found in Deuteronomy 24:16. So, how should we understand the warning in the Second Commandment?

As in any difficult passage of Scripture, we use God's whole counsel to seek to understand its meaning. We know that God is completely and perfectly just, and He always does what is right. We know from the passages we read that God will hold each person accountable for their sin.

Certainly, fathers have a significant influence on children and grandchildren, and by their example, children may indeed fall into the same sin. However, this should not be taken as the full meaning of the warning in Exodus 20:5. Some commentators suggest that the principle of covenant solidarity applies. Numerous scriptural examples show that when the covenant head of a family sinned against God, God often judged the whole family.

I believe the best understanding is to say that if the children continue in the idolatrous ways of their fathers, they are accountable for their sins and will receive the same punishment their fathers received. We should use this to remind parents and grandparents of the importance of setting a consistent example of God-honoring worship before the eyes of children and young people.

The Promise

Thankfully, the Second Commandment ends with a great promise. In verse 6, God expresses steadfast love toward thousands who love Him and keep His commandments, as opposed to those who hate Him by practicing worship with images. Notice that the gracious promise of God is, in a sense, greater than the warning. The blessing does not just last 3 or 4 generations but thousands. The promise highlights the stark contrast between 3 or 4 generations and thousands. In other words, there is a stark contrast between God's judgment of the disobedient image worshipper and His gracious love for those who worship Him in His ordained manner.

The implication in the promise is that there are great blessings upon those who keep the Second Commandment and their children. They are, in fact, eternal blessings. Proverbs 20:7 states, "The righteous who walks in his integrity, blessed are his children after him."

The phrase "steadfast love" in Exodus 20:6 reflects God's covenantal love for His people. The promise of blessings to those who obey the commandment and to their children echoes the covenant promise to Abraham. There, God said, "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Genesis 17:7). This is similar to the promise of the Second Commandment. Blessings for both present and future generations stem from God's covenant love.

The love for God mentioned in verse 6, just like the hatred for God in verse 5, is not an emotion. They are activities. They are thoughtful actions. God equates acts of obedience with love and acts of disobedience with hatred toward Him.

This should immediately remind us of the words of the Lord Jesus in John 14:15, where He also defines love for Him primarily as an activity: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." If we are maturing and growing as Christians, our love for God is reflected in our willingness to obey the Word of God. That is the mark of a mature believer. Does he or she love God, as demonstrated by obeying His Word? As in the Second Commandment, great blessings come to those who do obey.

Application for the Church Today

It is valuable to examine the Second Commandment and its application to the Church and to individual Christians. We must not be tempted to dismiss it and claim we have no desire for images or idolatry. We should remember that the law is spiritual. “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (Romans 7:14).

We know that an idol can be more than something we can touch and see. One can easily list dozens of potential idols of the heart! The obvious, of course: love of money, sex, alcohol and drugs, fashion, beauty, and on and on, but there are other not-so-obvious idols. Idols capable of dominating our hearts in place of God include our jobs, which can make us “workaholics.” Even our children, spouses, and fiancés can dominate our minds to the point that God is not given His rightful place in our lives.

The purpose of our study is to deal with matters of worship. What implications and instructions does the Second Commandment have for our public and private worship? First, we must worship according to God’s revealed will. The Lord Jesus Christ is the very heart of that will. Therefore, our worship must be Christ-centered and Christ-honoring.

Second, we must worship in Spirit and Truth. John 4:24 states that God did not reveal Himself in a physical form to the people of Israel. The Second Commandment implies that God is a Spirit.

Third, God has given us visual aids in our worship, namely, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These two sacraments are God-ordained aids for the church. They are means of grace God has given His people.

I believe the Second Commandment has much to say to those who believe that drama and dance should be part of their regular public worship. Sadly, in many evangelical churches, worship now includes visual elements rather than relying on the Spirit of God to work through the teaching and preaching of the Word. It is a sad trade-off! This is especially true when we consider the apostle’s words to the church at Rome. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

Of course, large segments of the “Church” worldwide maintain statues and images of the Virgin Mary, Joseph, and even Jesus. What a horrible disservice this is, and how misleading it is to those sincerely seeking to know and worship Christ.

Conclusion

The Second Commandment serves as a constant reminder that God alone determines how He is to be worshiped. Throughout Israel's history, from the golden calf at Sinai to Jeroboam's calves in Dan and Bethel, the temptation to represent God through images proved persistent. This commandment teaches us that God desires His people to worship Him correctly. We cannot separate loving God from obeying God. When we worship according to our own man-made interests rather than God's revealed will, we fundamentally misrepresent His character and rob Him of the honor and glory He deserves. Yet when we worship God according to His will, the promise is abundant, showing great love to the multitudes of those who love Him and keep His commandments.

For the Church today, the Second Commandment calls us to examine carefully not only what we worship but also how we worship. We must resist the constant temptation to make worship more accessible through visual representations, dramatic performances, or any human innovation that detracts from the Spirit and God’s truth in worship. The gospel itself points us to the ultimate answer to this commandment. In Christ, the invisible God became visible, not to establish a pattern for images but to accomplish our redemption. Now, through the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, we worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, without need of physical representations. Our worship must be regulated by Scripture alone, centered on Christ, and offered by grace alone through faith alone, all to the glory of God. May the Christian Church heed this commandment faithfully, worshipping the Lord according to His Word, for His glory, and for the spiritual good of our souls and the souls of generations who follow.

“The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130).

The Third Commandment

Exodus 20:7

Study

This chapter examines the Third Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:7, which forbids taking the name of the LORD in vain. Beyond prohibiting vulgar profanity, this commandment addresses the reverent use of God's holy name across all aspects of worship and life. God's name represents His character, His person, and His glory. Throughout Scripture, God's names reveal aspects of His divine nature and redemptive work. The Third Commandment calls believers to honor God's name in speech, in worship, in oaths, and in daily conduct. It warns against hypocrisy, false profession, and irreverent familiarity. In our study, we explore the theological significance of God's names, examine ways this commandment can be violated, and consider its application for believers today who claim the name of Christ as Lord and Savior. The commandment concludes with a stern and explicit warning that God will not hold guiltless those who take His name in vain, underscoring the seriousness with which He regards the honor of His name.

Introduction

We come now to the Third Commandment, which reads, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." Like the first two commandments, this one concerns our relationship with God and the proper worship and honor all mankind should give to Him alone.

Most people, when they think of the Third Commandment, immediately think of profanity or swearing. While that's certainly part of it, the commandment encompasses far more than avoiding inappropriate language. It addresses how we use God's name in every context, whether in worship, conversation, making promises, or simply living as Christians.

Consider how Jesus himself taught us to pray. The very first petition in the Lord's Prayer is "Our Father in heaven, ***hallowed be your name***." Before asking for daily bread, before seeking forgiveness, before any other request, Jesus directs us to pray that God's name would be treated as holy. This highlights the central importance of honoring God's name and is closely linked to

the Third Commandment. To "hallow" God's name means to regard it as special and to set it apart, to treat it with the reverence it deserves. This is precisely what the Third Commandment requires of us.

In our culture today, we are surrounded by the casual, irreverent use of God's name. The names of God and Jesus Christ are used repeatedly as expressions of surprise, anger, or emphasis, without regard for their holy meaning. There is no doubt that this is a sure indicator of humanity's fallen and sinful condition. Even among professing Christians, there can be a dangerous familiarity and carelessness in how we speak of God. This commandment calls us to something far different.

The Meaning of God's Name

To understand this commandment properly, we need to first understand what the name of God means. In Scripture, a name is much more than just a label or identifier. A person's name represents their character, reputation, and very being. This is especially true of God's name.

Throughout the Old Testament, God reveals Himself through various names, each one disclosing something of His character and nature. He is known as Elohim, the powerful Creator. He is Yahweh or Jehovah, the self-existent, eternal, covenant-keeping God. He is El Shaddai, God Almighty. He is Adonai, the sovereign Lord and Master. Though there are many, here are just a few names. Each one carries weight and meaning.

When God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God's response was profound: "I AM WHO I AM."[19] This name, often rendered as Yahweh or Jehovah, speaks of God's eternal, unchanging, self-existent nature. He is the God who was, who is, and who is to come. This name, revealed to Moses, was represented by the four Hebrew consonants YHWH (called the Tetragrammaton). It came to be regarded as so sacred that devout Jews would not speak it aloud. Some may think that this practice was unnecessary. Regardless, the tradition reflects something genuinely profound about the Jewish understanding of God's holiness and the weightiness of His self-revealed name. To

[19] Exodus 3:13–14.

the Jews, this practice was not superstition but a deep, covenant-conscious reverence for the God who had made Himself known to His people.

Many centuries later, Jesus would use this exact name for Himself. In the Gospel of John, He repeatedly declared "I am," echoing the divine name revealed to Moses. When He said, "Before Abraham was, I am," the Jewish leaders understood exactly what He was claiming and gathered stones to stone Him for blasphemy. Jesus purposely identified Himself with the eternal, self-existent God of the burning bush. His "I am" statements throughout John's Gospel, in which He declares Himself the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, and the life, all point back to that holy name revealed to Moses. In Christ, we see the fullness of that name made in human flesh. We see the fullness of deity in bodily form.

The name of God is no small thing. It represents all that God is. It encompasses His holiness, power, love, justice, mercy, and every other divine attribute. When we use God's name, we invoke the character and presence of the Almighty. How we speak of Him and how we use His name reveal whether we truly fear Him in the biblical sense, that profound reverence and awe that recognizes who He is and who we are in relation to Him. Solomon wrote (Proverbs 9:10), “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” and nowhere is wisdom more evident than in how carefully and reverently we handle the name of the Eternal and Almighty God who spoke worlds into existence.

The Prohibition

The third commandment states, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain." The Hebrew word translated "in vain" carries the idea of emptiness, worthlessness, or falseness. To take God's name in vain is to use it in an empty, frivolous, or even deceptive manner. It is to treat as common and meaningless that which is holy and sacred. John Calvin, in his classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, writes, "We ought to be so disposed in mind and speech that we neither think nor say anything concerning God and his mysteries, without reverence and much soberness; that in estimating his works we conceive nothing but what is honorable to him."[20] While we welcome a sincere “praise the Lord” from people in many cases it has become trivial and insincere. If the ancient Jews trembled even to utter the name of God aloud, how

[20] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22.

much more should we, who have received the fuller revelation of His grace in Christ, be careful to honor that name every time we speak it.

Someone might think, “That was a different age and a different era. People took religion more seriously back then.” To that, I say “nonsense!” The Almighty and Holy God of ancient Israel and of Calvin’s day is the same God we worship and pray to in our day. All humanity owes to God the reverence and awe that is His due. As the prophet Jeremiah wrote, “There is none like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? ***For this is your due***; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you” (Jeremiah 10:6-7).

This commandment was given to a people who were called to honor God's name. Israel was called by the name of the LORD. They were His covenant-chosen people, set apart to represent Him among the nations. How they used His name mattered greatly because it reflected on His character and glory.

The same is true for the Church today. We confess the name of Christ. We are called Christians. We represent Him before a watching world. How we use His name and how we live as those called by His name are matters of the greatest importance.

Ways of Violating the Third Commandment

There are numerous ways in which this commandment can be broken. We would do well to examine each carefully. Sadly, many have fallen into patterns of speech or behavior that dishonor our God’s name.

Perhaps most obviously, the Third Commandment is violated by profanity and cursing. Using God's name or the name of Jesus Christ as a curse word or an exclamation of anger is a direct violation of this command. Such usage treats the sacred name of God as common and meaningless. It is a form of blasphemy that shows contempt for the majesty and holiness of God.

Sadly, our society is inundated with this kind of language. The entertainment industry fills movies and television shows with profanity that uses God's name irreverently. It is increasingly difficult to find entertainment that does not use the name of our Savior as an expression of anger

or frustration. Many people, without a second thought, use phrases such as "Oh my God" or "Jesus Christ" as exclamations, without considering their meaning. This mindless speech is heard from people of all ages, including young people. As believers, such language should be unthinkable. We should cringe every time the name of our precious Savior is used in such a thoughtless and ungodly way. Often, when we attempt to ask the person not to use the Lord's name in vain, they look at us as if we are from another planet! We must guard our tongues and refuse to participate in speech that dishonors the true God we claim to worship.

The commandment is also violated by careless or thoughtless speech about God. This includes using God's name flippantly in conversation, making jokes about sacred things, or speaking of God in ways that show a lack of reverence and awe. There is a familiarity with God that may or may not be appropriate for those who have been adopted into His family through Christ. However, this familiarity must never cross the line into irreverence or presumption.

In Puritan and Reformed writings, authors often spoke of maintaining a "holy fear" of God even while enjoying close communion with Him. They understood that God is both our loving Father and the holy, transcendent Creator of all things. We must approach Him with reverence, even as we rejoice in the bold access we have through Christ. Our speech about God should reflect a balance of intimacy and awe.

The fear of God and the love for God are not in opposition. Deuteronomy 10:12 makes this clear to us, "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to ***fear the LORD*** your God, to walk in all his ways, ***to love him***, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul?"

Listen to the prophet Isaiah, who was given a rare vision of the eternal God in Heaven. "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!' And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was

filled with smoke" (Isaiah 6:1-4). One must ask this question: If sinless angels constantly recognize the holiness of God, surely the fear of God should be in the hearts of sinful mankind! Tragically, our age has fallen far from this reverence, treating the names of God and Christ with a casualness that would have horrified earlier generations of believers. I have often wondered why the glorious name of Jesus Christ has become, to so many in our world, a curse word. Surely this is the task of the evil one working to further harden the hearts of so many!

J. I. Packer, in his excellent, well-known book *Knowing God*, captures the essence of this commandment when he writes: "The third commandment forbids us to use God's name in a way that is empty, frivolous, or insincere. It requires that we treat God's name with the respect that is due to God himself, remembering always who and what he is. Casual, thoughtless, or irreverent mention of God or Christ is forbidden, for it dishonors the one whose name is invoked."[21] It is a great grief to the believer to hear the name of their Redeemer used in such an evil manner. We long for the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

The Third Commandment is also broken by false oaths and broken vows. In the ancient world and in some contexts today, people invoked God's name when making solemn promises or taking oaths. To swear by the name of the LORD was to call upon God as a witness to the truth of what was said or the sincerity of what was promised. If a person made an oath in God's name and then broke it, or if they swore falsely in His name, they were using God's name in vain. They were treating it as if it carried no weight or authority. Although in the modern age many seem to take vows lightly, divorce being just one example, this remains a serious matter. Jesus Himself addressed this issue in the Sermon on the Mount, teaching that our word should be so trustworthy that we need not invoke God's name to back it up. "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matthew 5:37).

In some official settings, swearing an oath on the Bible is still practiced. Its origins in America date back to the American Revolution. The U.S. Judiciary Act of 1789 formalized the use of "so help me God" in oaths for federal officers, distinguishing them from secular affirmations. George Washington reportedly added it to his 1789 presidential oath, setting a tradition continued by

[21] J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 56.

most presidents, alongside the hand-on-the-Bible swearing common in state law. Over time, however, this practice has become increasingly uncommon, and in many courtrooms and official hearings today, it is entirely optional. That shift alone tells us something. When a culture no longer feels the weight of placing its hand on Scripture and calling upon God as witness, it reveals how far the reverence for God has quietly faded from public life.

One sad example we witnessed on January 1, 2026, was Zohran Mamdani being sworn in as the 112th mayor of New York City, becoming the first mayor in the city's history to take the oath of office on a Quran rather than a Bible. He used his grandfather's Quran along with a centuries-old copy on loan from the New York Public Library. While there is no legal requirement to take the oath on any specific text, religious or otherwise, most of Mamdani's predecessors chose to use a Bible. His predecessor, Eric Adams, used a family Bible for his own swearing-in. This event illustrates the very point being made above. What was once a deeply rooted tradition, placing one's hand on the Scriptures and calling upon the God of the Bible as witness, is now treated as a matter of personal preference, further reflecting the declining reverence for God in American public life.[22]

The application here extends beyond formal oaths to any promise or commitment we make. If we claim to be followers of Christ, our word should be our bond. We should be known as people of integrity whose yes means yes and whose no means no. When we make promises we do not keep, we dishonor His name and give the watching world reason to doubt the character of the God we claim to serve. This principle was once a common part of everyday life. There was a time when a handshake carried the weight of a legal contract, when a man's word was considered sufficient because it was understood to be spoken before God. Verbal agreements were, and in many cases still are, legally enforceable.[23] But the growing reliance on written contracts and legal safeguards reflects something deeper than legal "progress." It quietly reveals that trust

[22] Sarah Cascone, "Historic Quran Used in Zohran Mamdani's Inauguration Goes on View," Artnet News, January 6, 2026, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/zohran-mamdani-quran-nypl-2735027.

[23] As a side note, even in modern law, oral contracts are legally enforceable, especially in situations where one party has already performed the obligations of the agreement. The following is one interesting example that held up in a court of law. In 1984, Getty Oil was sold to Pennzoil through a handshake deal that was binding under New York law, and when Texaco later interfered by making a higher offer, Pennzoil won a lawsuit and was awarded billions in damages.

between people has weakened, and with it, the sense that our words are spoken under the eye of a holy God who holds us accountable for every promise we make.

Additionally, this commandment is violated through hypocrisy and false profession. This is perhaps the most subtle and dangerous way of breaking the Third Commandment, yet it may be the most common. When we claim to be followers of Christ yet live in ways that contradict that profession, we take His name in vain. We confess His name while denying His lordship through our actions.

Paul writes in Romans 2:24, quoting from the prophets, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." He was addressing Jews who claimed to know God but whose lives did not match their profession. The same charge can be leveled against many who call themselves Christians today. We take the name of Christ upon ourselves, but if our lives do not reflect His character, we use His name in vain. In recent years, far too many pastors and television evangelists have lived secret lives of sin only to be exposed and ultimately bring great dishonor to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Westminster Larger Catechism wisely observes that among the sins forbidden in the Third Commandment is "making profession of religion in hypocrisy, or for sinister ends; being ashamed of it, or a shame to it, by unconformable, unwise, unfruitful, and offensive walking, or backsliding from it."[24]

This is why Scripture emphasizes the fruit of genuine faith. True believers will not be perfect, and their remaining sinful nature will remain, but there will be evidence of Christ in their lives. There will be growth in holiness, progress in sanctification, and an increasing conformity to the image of Christ. When these things are absent, when someone claims the name of Christ yet lives in persistent, unrepentant sin, they dishonor His name and bring reproach upon the gospel. I believe this is one of the reasons why the apostle writes in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" I can think of no greater tragedy than claiming to be a Christian for most of your life, yet, in reality, remaining

[24] Westminster Assembly. *The Westminster Larger Catechism*. 1648.

outside a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and at the judgment hearing these terrible words of Jesus, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23).

The third commandment is also violated through irreverent worship. The manner in which we approach God in worship is of great importance. If we come before Him carelessly, if we sing His praises with our lips while our hearts are far from Him, if we treat the gathered worship of God's people as mere entertainment or a social gathering, we take His name in vain.

The prophet Malachi confronted this very issue among the people of Israel. They were going through the motions of worship, offering sacrifices and maintaining the outward forms of religion, but their hearts were not engaged. God rebuked them sharply with these words: "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil?" (Malachi 1:8). By not offering the best to the Lord, they were treating the worship of God as just a formality, something to be gotten through with minimal effort or thought.

There is no doubt that we face similar temptations today. How easy it is to sit in church on Sunday morning with our minds wandering, to sing hymns without thinking about the words, and to hear the Word preached without applying it to our hearts. Or perhaps we often watch the clock, hoping the minister will end his sermon soon! This type of worship is vain. It uses the name of God in vain by treating Him as unworthy of our full attention and wholehearted devotion.[25]

The Seriousness of the Warning

The Third Commandment ends with a stern warning: "The LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." This is strong language. God is making clear that violations of this commandment will not go unpunished. Those who treat His name with contempt, who use it carelessly, will be held accountable.

This warning teaches us that God is jealous for the glory and honor of His name. Throughout Scripture, we see God acting to vindicate His name and protect His reputation. When the people

[25] In our day and age, the cell phone poses a great temptation to be distracted in worship. Aside from muting the call, and unless absolutely necessary, may I suggest turning it off! Or, better yet, leave it in the car!

of Israel grievously sinned and brought shame upon His name, God judged them severely. Yet even in judgment, His ultimate purpose was the vindication of His name and the restoration of His glory.

The warning also underscores the seriousness of calling oneself a Christian. To be called by the name of the LORD is a tremendous privilege, but it comes with responsibility. Believers in Christ are His representatives and ambassadors. How they conduct themselves reflects on Him. Calvin reminds us of the weight of claiming God's name: "Those who have been adopted as children of God, and admitted to the fellowship of the Church, must reverence God as their Father. For if He is our Father, His glory ought to be dear to us, that we may not permit it to be tarnished by any reproach. Since He has been pleased to consecrate us to Himself, and to make us the temple of His Holy Spirit, we ought to take care that His name be not blasphemed through our fault."[26] We must all pray that the Holy Spirit will help us maintain our Christian testimony at all times.

At the same time, we must remember that God is merciful. For those who have violated this commandment, and that includes all of us to some degree, there is forgiveness in Christ. The gospel tells us that Jesus bore the guilt of our sins, including our sins of speech and our failures to honor God's name as we ought. Through faith in Him, we can be declared guiltless, not because we have perfectly kept this commandment, but because Christ has kept it perfectly on our behalf and has taken on the punishment we deserved for breaking it. This does not diminish the seriousness of the warning. Rather, it should lead us to the cross in gratitude and motivate us to live in a manner worthy of adoption into the family of God. Having been forgiven much, we should love much and should strive to honor the One who has shown us such mercy.

God's Name in the New Testament

The New Testament continues and expands the teaching of the Third Commandment. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, ***hallowed*** be your name." To hallow something is to treat it as holy, to set it apart as sacred. This should be our constant desire and

[26] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22.

prayer, that God's name would be honored and revered, both in our own hearts and throughout the world.

Jesus also taught that we will give an account for every careless word we speak. "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37). This truth should cause us to examine our speech carefully. Are we using God's name reverently? Are our words building up or tearing down? Are we speaking in ways that honor Christ?

The apostles emphasized the importance of the name of Jesus Christ. Peter proclaimed, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The name of Jesus is powerful. It is the name above every name, to which every knee will one day bow. How we treat that name now matters for eternity.

Paul exhorted believers, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). To do something in the name of Jesus is to do it with His authority, as His representative, and for His glory. This should govern every aspect of our lives. Are we living and speaking in ways that honor the name of Christ?

Application for Believers Today

How then should we apply this commandment in our daily lives? Before exploring its practical application, we must recognize that this commandment ultimately points us to Christ. Jesus declared in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). He perfectly honored His Father's name in every word, thought, and deed. Where we have failed to guard God's name with our lips and lives, Christ succeeded completely. His perfect obedience becomes ours through faith, and His Spirit now works in us to produce the very reverence this commandment demands. We keep this commandment not to earn God's favor, which is already ours in Christ, but because we have been transformed by His grace and empowered by His Spirit.

We must remember that the commandments are a guide for the believer, sometimes called a "rule of life." Our blessed Savior kept all of them perfectly. We stand upon His merits and righteousness. Seeking to live by the light of Scripture, we do so out of love and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. With this gospel foundation established, we can consider several practical matters to which the Third Commandment applies today.

To start, we must be cautious in our speech. This includes not only avoiding profanity and vulgar language but also being thoughtful and reverent in how we speak about God and His Word. Our casual conversations should reflect the same reverence for God's name that we show in more formal settings. We should avoid using God's name thoughtlessly, even in expressions that have become common in our culture.

This also means being careful about how we speak to God in prayer. While we should approach Him with the confidence and intimacy that comes through Christ, we must never lose sight of His majesty and holiness. Our prayers should be marked by reverence, even as they express the closeness we enjoy with our heavenly Father.

Consider also the matter of keeping our word. When we make promises or commitments, we should keep them. Our yes should mean yes, and our no should mean no. Believers in Christ should be known for integrity and character that align with their profession of faith. This is especially important when we have made vows to God, whether marriage vows, membership vows in a church, or other important commitments. To break such vows is to treat God's name lightly and to invite His discipline.

Beyond our words and promises, we must examine our hearts for hypocrisy. Do our lives match our profession? Are we growing in holiness and Christlikeness, or are we content to claim to be Christians while living in ways that contradict Holy Scripture? This calls for regular self-examination and an honest, humble assessment of where we truly stand before God.

Jesus often rebuked the religious leaders about hypocrisy. Six times in Matthew 23, Jesus uses the phrase "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." Matthew 23:27-28 is but one example, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

It was not only the religious leaders who received rebuke and warnings. In Luke 12:1b, speaking to His disciples, He said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” The point is that, in our sinful nature, especially among church leaders, there remains the temptation toward hypocrisy. Those who profess to know Christ must fight against this sin!

Think also about how we worship. Whether we are gathered with the church for corporate worship or in our private devotions, we should approach God with hearts prepared to meet Him. We should come expecting to encounter the living God, and our worship should reflect the weight and wonder of that reality. This means preparing our hearts before we come to worship, engaging our minds and emotions during worship, and carrying the impact of that worship into our daily lives.

If we teach or preach, we must prayerfully handle Scripture carefully and accurately, with a deep desire for the Holy Spirit's help. If we are students of the Word, we must read and interpret it honestly, seeking to understand what God has said rather than reading our own ideas into the text. In all our use of Scripture, we must remember that we are handling the very words of God and do so with appropriate reverence and care. We must hear and keep the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

Above all, as believers in the Savior, we are called by His name. Everything we do and say should be done with an awareness of whose we are and whom we represent. When people look at us, they should see something of Christ. When they hear us speak, they should hear words that honor Him. When they observe our lives, they should see evidence of His transforming power.

This is a high calling, and we will often fall short. But this is precisely why we need the gospel. We need a Savior who perfectly honored the Father's name and who knows us and can forgive us when we fail. We need the Holy Spirit to empower us to live in ways that bring glory to God. We need a church family to encourage, correct, and spur us on toward love and good deeds.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, the Third Commandment calls us to honor God's name in every aspect of our lives. It forbids not only profanity but also careless speech, broken vows, hypocrisy, irreverent worship, and the misuse of God's Word. It reminds us that being in the Kingdom of God is a privilege that entails great responsibility.

The warning at the end of the commandment must be taken seriously. God will not hold guiltless those who take His name in vain. Yet for those who trust in Christ, there is forgiveness for every failure and power to live in a manner worthy of the name we profess.

As we reflect on this commandment, we need to examine our hearts and our speech. Are we honoring God's name as we should? Are our lives consistent with our profession of faith? Are we using our words to build up or to tear down, to honor God or to dishonor Him?

May God give us grace to hallow His name, to speak of Him with reverence and awe, to keep our promises, to worship with sincerity, and to live as those who truly belong to Christ. May the name of the LORD be glorified in us and through us, both now and forevermore. And may we, by His grace, be found among those whose lives bring honor rather than reproach to the name that is above every name, the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

"Let my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word!" (Psalm 119:169)

The Fourth Commandment

Exodus 20:8-11

Study

This chapter examines the Fourth Commandment, as recorded in Exodus 20:8-11, concerning the observance of the Sabbath. The commandment reveals God's gracious provision of rest for His people, reflecting both the pattern of creation and the redemption accomplished in Christ. Throughout Israel's history, the Sabbath served as a sign of the covenant relationship between God and His people, distinguishing them from the surrounding nations. The commandment includes both a positive instruction to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy and a negative prohibition against ordinary labor on the seventh day. This study considers the theological foundations of the Sabbath, its purpose in both creation and redemption, its observance in Israel, and its fulfillment in Christ for the Church today. The Christian observance of the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, commemorates Christ's resurrection and our redemption and anticipates the eternal rest that awaits all who trust in Jesus.

Introduction

The Fourth Commandment stands out among the Ten Commandments in several ways. It is one of the longest commandments, second only to the Second Commandment in its length. It is the only commandment that begins with a positive instruction rather than a prohibition. While the other commandments tell us what not to do, the Fourth Commandment tells us what we are to do: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

The Sabbath was a gift from God to humanity. It was not a burden but a blessing. Jesus declared in Mark 2:27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In our culture today, with its constant activity and endless pursuit of productivity, we need to hear this commandment perhaps more than any other. One day in seven should be a delight to our souls. Thomas Watson, writing of this delight, explains, "The Sabbath is a market day for the soul. It is the golden spot of the week. God has set apart one day in seven for his immediate worship and service. As he has six days for us, so he will have one day for himself. This day is to be sanctified, that is, set apart

for holy uses."[27] We need to see that God created us with a need for rest, both physical and spiritual. He established a pattern of work and rest that reflects His own work in creation.

The Fourth Commandment connects us to the beginning of God's revelation. It points us back to Genesis and the creation week. When God rested on the seventh day, He was not fatigued. Rather, He was establishing a pattern for His creatures. He was showing us that there is an order to life, a rhythm of labor and rest, of work and worship. This commandment should remind us that we are not merely workers trying to make a living. We are worshippers created for fellowship with our Creator. We are created to give Him glory and praise. Giving God glory is the great purpose of all mankind.

Throughout Israel's history, the Sabbath was a distinguishing mark of God's covenant people. It set them apart from surrounding nations and reminded them each week of their belonging to the Lord. Observing the Sabbath was a confession of faith, acknowledging that God was their Creator and Redeemer. In Ezekiel 20:12, it was a sign between God and His people. "Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, ***as a sign*** between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them."

The Sabbath in Creation

Before we examine the commandment itself, we need to consider the Sabbath's foundation in creation. Genesis 2:2-3 tells us, "And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation." Notice the language. "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." This means He set it apart as special, different from the other six days. He did this before the fall of man into sin. The Sabbath was not introduced later as a consequence of sin. It was part of God's good creation from the beginning.

When God rested on the seventh day, He was not recovering from a hard week of work. The prophet reminds us of this: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary" (Isaiah

[27] Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 97.

40:28). God's rest was a cessation of His work of creation. It was a completion, a satisfaction with what He had accomplished. In Genesis 1:31, we read that "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

God's rest on the seventh day established a pattern for humanity. We are created in God's image, and part of being an image-bearer means following the pattern He set. Six days of labor followed by one day of rest reflects the very order of creation. It is integral to God's design for the world. This is why the Fourth Commandment is not arbitrary. It is grounded in the way God made us.

Some have suggested that the Sabbath was only for Israel and has no application to us today. However, the Sabbath's foundation in creation teaches otherwise. The Sabbath principle precedes the giving of the law at Sinai and goes back to the beginning. Robert Rayburn offers us a helpful comment. He writes, "The Sabbath, if the keeping holy of one day out of the week, if the setting apart of one day for holy purposes is a creation ordinance, intended for the life of all mankind, intended to be part of human life even if there had been no Fall, then it becomes exceedingly hard to believe that the Sabbath just fell away in the new epoch established by Christ and his apostles."[28] While the specific day may change, as we will see, the principle of one day in seven for rest and worship remains.

The Commandment Examined

Exodus 20:8-11 reads, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

The commandment begins with the word "remember." This is important. God's people are called to recall what He has done. They should remember creation. They should remember His provision. They must remember that He is Lord in all things, including our time. New Testament Christians are to recall the body and blood of the Savior when partaking in the Lord's Supper.

[28] Robert S. Rayburn, "Studies in Exodus 16:1–6" (sermon, Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, August 21, 2005), https://www.faithtacoma.org/exodus/2005-08-21-pm.

The word "remember" suggests that we might forget if we are not careful. Amid the busy activity of life and the pursuit of our own interests, we can forget God. The Sabbath, later the Lord's Day, urges us to pause and remember.

The command to keep the Sabbath holy asks us to set it apart and make it different from the other six days. It's not for our normal routines, but a day dedicated to the Lord. Holiness, at its core, means separation: something sacred is kept only for God's purposes. The Sabbath day is holy (set apart) because God has claimed it as His own.

Notice that the commandment includes a mandate to work. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." This is important. God is not calling us to be idle. Work is good. It is part of God's design for us. Before the fall, Adam was given work to do in the garden. Labor itself is not a curse, though sin has certainly made work more difficult and frustrating. God calls us to faithful labor six days a week. By "work," we do not mean only paid employment. Ask any mother raising children at home whether what she does is "work!"

On the seventh day, we are to cease our ordinary labor. The prohibition is comprehensive. "On it you shall not do any work." This applies not only to the head of the household but to everyone under his care. Sons, daughters, servants, and even livestock are to rest. This shows God's compassion and concern for all His creatures. The Sabbath rest is not just for the privileged few but for everyone.

The commandment ends by pointing us back to creation. "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." The reason for the Sabbath is rooted in God's creative work. We rest because God rested. We follow His pattern because we are His creatures.

The Sabbath as a Sign

In several places in Scripture, the Sabbath is described as a sign. In Exodus 31:13, God says, "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.'" The Sabbath was a visible marker of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

The prophet Ezekiel also speaks of the Sabbath as a sign. In Ezekiel 20:12, God says, "Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them." The observance of the Sabbath distinguished Israel from all other nations. It was a weekly testimony to the world that Israel belonged to the Lord.

This understanding of the Sabbath as a sign helps us see its importance today in the Lord's Day. It was not merely a day off from work. It was a confession of faith. It was an acknowledgment that God was their Creator and Redeemer. When Israel faithfully observed the Sabbath, they were proclaiming to the watching world that they served a different God, a God who had entered into a covenant with them. As believers in Christ under the New Covenant, the Lord's Day is also a confession of faith. Keeping the Lord's Day special to the Christian is a witness to the watching world.

The Sabbath ordinance also pointed forward to something greater. It was a shadow of the reality that would come in Christ. The book of Hebrews tells us that the Sabbath rest was a picture of the spiritual rest we have in Christ. Hebrews 4:9-10 says, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." The true Sabbath rest is found not in a particular day but in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Sabbath in Israel's History

Throughout Israel's history, the observance of the Sabbath was a recurring issue. At times, the people faithfully kept the Sabbath. At other times, they neglected it. The prophets frequently rebuked Israel for its failure to honor the Sabbath.

Isaiah addressed this issue. In Isaiah 58:13-14, God says, "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable, if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly, then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth." Notice the condition. If Israel were to honor the Sabbath, it would be blessed. The opposite was also true. If they dishonored the Sabbath, they would face judgment.

Jeremiah also warned the people about Sabbath-breaking. In Jeremiah 17:21-22, the prophet says, "Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers." The people were engaging in commerce on the Sabbath, treating it like any other day. This was a violation of God's command and a sign of their spiritual condition.

Nehemiah faced the same problem upon returning to Jerusalem after the exile. Nehemiah 13:15-18 records his response. He saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath, bringing in grain, loading donkeys, and selling produce in Jerusalem. Nehemiah rebuked the leaders and reminded them that this very sin had brought God's judgment upon their fathers. He took steps to enforce Sabbath observance, including closing the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath to prevent merchants from entering.

These examples from Israel's history show us that Sabbath observance was not optional. It was a serious matter. The way Israel treated the Sabbath revealed the condition of their hearts. When they observed the Sabbath, they acknowledged God's lordship over their lives. When they profaned the Sabbath, they were declaring their independence from God.

Jesus and the Sabbath

In the New Testament, the Sabbath was a point of controversy between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day. The Pharisees had added many regulations to the commandment of the Sabbath, creating a burden for the people that God never intended. They had turned the Sabbath from a blessing into a burden of legal requirements.

Jesus challenged their misuse of the Sabbath. He healed on the Sabbath, which outraged the Pharisees. In John 5:16-17, we read, "And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working.'" Jesus was not breaking the Sabbath. He was demonstrating the Sabbath's true purpose: to bring blessing and restoration to God's people.

On another occasion, when the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, Jesus reminded them of David eating the bread of the Presence when he was

hungry. This was considered unlawful because only the priests were allowed to eat the bread. Then Jesus made the remarkable statement we mentioned earlier: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath was a gift, not a burden. It was meant to serve human needs, not to oppress people with endless regulations.

Jesus also declared, "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." This was a claim to deity. He asserted His authority over the Sabbath because He was the one who instituted it in creation. He was Lord of all, including the Sabbath. His hearers would have understood this as a declaration of His divine identity.

The healings Jesus performed on the Sabbath were not violations of God's law. They were acts of mercy and compassion. They demonstrated that doing good on the Sabbath was entirely appropriate. The Pharisees had so twisted the commandment about the Sabbath that they believed it was wrong to help someone in need on the Sabbath. Jesus corrected their error and showed them the heart of God.

The Lord's Day

After the resurrection of Jesus, something significant happened. The early Christians began gathering for worship on the first day of the week, not the seventh. This was the day Jesus rose from the dead. It was the day He appeared to His disciples. It was also the day the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. The first day of the week became known as the Lord's Day.

We see this pattern in Acts 20:7, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them." The early church gathered on the first day of the week for worship. In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul instructs the believers, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper." The first day was set aside for corporate worship and giving.

The Apostle John calls the first day of the week "the Lord's day" in Revelation 1:10. This designation indicates that the day belonged to the Lord Jesus in a special way. It was His day, the day of His resurrection, the day when the Church gathered to worship Him.

This change from the seventh day to the first day was not arbitrary. It reflected the new reality brought about by the resurrection. The old covenant Sabbath pointed both back to the creation order and forward to the rest that would come through Christ. Now that Christ had come and accomplished redemption, the day of worship changed to commemorate His victory over sin and death. The Lord's Day is now a day to remember the new creation inaugurated by Christ's resurrection.

The prophet Haggai wrote that “the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:9). In other words, just as the new temple surpassed the old in glory, so the Lord’s Day, which commemorates the new creation inaugurated by Christ’s resurrection, surpasses the old Sabbath that commemorated the first creation. Thomas Watson, writing on this subject, explains this further. “The grand reason for changing the Jewish Sabbath to the Lord’s day is that it puts us in mind of the mystery of our redemption by Christ. The reason why God instituted the old Sabbath was to be a memorial of the creation; but he has now brought the first day of the week in its room in memory of a more glorious work than creation, which is redemption.”[29]

The Sabbath Fulfilled in Christ

The writer of Hebrews helps us understand how Christ fulfills the Sabbath. In Hebrews 4:1-11, the author speaks of entering God's rest. He warns his readers not to fall short of entering that rest through unbelief, just as the wilderness generation did. Then he explains, "For whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his."

The true Sabbath rest is the rest of salvation. It is trusting in Christ's finished work on our behalf. In John 19, we read that on the cross, Jesus said, "It is finished." The work of redemption was complete. We enter that rest by faith, trusting in what Christ has done rather than in our own efforts.

This does not mean the principle of a weekly Sabbath is no longer relevant. Rather, it now takes on fuller meaning. It reminds us each week of the spiritual rest we have in Christ through His

[29] Watson, *The Ten Commandments,* 96.

work of redemption. It gives us a sense of the eternal rest that awaits us. It calls us to cease from our labors and focus on worship, fellowship, and the things of God.

Colossians 2:16-17 says, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." The Sabbath under the old covenant was a shadow pointing to Christ. Now that we have Christ, we are not to judge one another about days. However, this does not abolish the principle of setting aside one day in seven for worship and rest.

The Lord's Day is a gift to the Church. It is a day to gather with God's people, hear His Word proclaimed, celebrate the sacraments, and pray and sing praises to His name. It is a day to rest from our ordinary labors and focus on eternal things. It is a foretaste of the eternal Sabbath rest that awaits all who are in Christ. To those who love Christ and fellow believers, the Lord's Day is by far the best day of the week.

Addressing this topic of experiencing the Lord's Day as a great blessing, Sinclair Ferguson writes, "I can still sense the transformation that took place in my experience of Sunday when I became a Christian. It was now no more of a burden than a bird's wings. Rather than crush me, it seemed to sustain me. Boredom was gone. It became the best day of the week. And yet it was still Sunday; it was still the first day of the week. But the sense of duty in going to the church services which I had attended and the Bible reading which I had been doing for several years, believing that doing these things might make me a Christian, these seemed overnight to be transformed into a delight."[30] If you are reading these words and find the Lord's Day boring and a burden, I urge you to examine your spiritual priorities.

It has often been said, I believe accurately, that man is his own worst enemy. I suggest that ignoring the blessings of the Lord's Day is a classic example. For many years in Western culture, Sundays were recognized as a special day, and there was at least some remnant of respect for observance. Those days are long gone, and sadly, they are long gone even among many

[30] Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Fourth Commandment," Banner of Truth (October 24, 2016), https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2016/the-fourth-commandment/.

professing Christians. Ernest C. Reisinger reminds us of the Church's great need to understand the blessings of this special day. “Our generation is in desperate need of some biblical instruction concerning the fourth Commandment. We should be shocked when we learn that some Bible teachers and ministers undermine the practice of the worship and service of God by excluding the Fourth Commandment from the Decalogue. Antinomians rant against the Fourth Commandment. Legalists make it unpleasant and impassable. Instructed Christians delight in it. The Fourth Commandment is worthy of serious study because of its importance in our spiritual warfare and is crucial for our corrupt generation.”[31]

Application for the Church Today

What does the Fourth Commandment mean for us today? How should we observe the Lord's Day? These are important questions, and Christians throughout history and in modern times have answered them in different ways. God has given us principles from Scripture to guide our practice.

We can begin with the simple fact that we should honor the Lord's Day as a special day set apart for worship. This is the primary purpose of the day. We are to gather with the people of God for corporate worship. The writer of Hebrews 10:25 warns us, "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Corporate worship on the Lord's Day is not optional for Christians. It is a command from the Word of God.

Also, we should make every attempt to rest from our ordinary labors on the Lord's Day. This means, as much as possible, avoiding the work we do the other six days of the week. Yes, there will always be exceptions and the need to work, but as God providentially allows, we should observe this special day. If we labor in an office during the week, Sunday should not be a day for office work. If we labor with our hands during the week, Sunday should be a day of rest from that labor. God calls us to cease from our regular work so we can focus on Him.

This does not mean the Lord's Day should be a day of laziness or idleness. It is a day for active engagement in worship, prayer, Scripture reading, and fellowship with other believers. It is a day

[31] Ernest C. Reisinger, *Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 46.

to do good, serve others, visit the sick and needy, and encourage one another in the faith. Jesus showed us that works of mercy and necessity are entirely appropriate on the Sabbath.

We should guard against treating the Lord's Day like any other day. The Puritans warned against making the Lord's Day a day for personal pleasure and pursuits. As Thomas Watson so elegantly put it, it is the “Market day for the soul.” If this is true, and I believe it is, I suggest, dear reader, that you feed your soul! While we should find joy and delight in the day, let our focus be on the Lord rather than on ourselves. In the New Covenant, Isaiah's words remain relevant: "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable" (Isaiah 58:13).

This raises questions about what activities are appropriate on the Lord's Day. Is it right to engage in recreation or entertainment on Sunday? Should we shop or eat at restaurants, activities that require others to work? These are matters of conscience, and Christians may differ in their convictions. In matters of someone else’s conscience, we should be gracious and let Christian love be our guide. The important point is that we should all strive to be guided by the principle that this blessed day belongs to the Lord and should be used primarily for His glory and our spiritual good. Galatians 5:1 helps us understand that we do not need to legislate what a believer may or may not do on the Lord’s Day. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

In addition, we should recognize that the Lord's Day is a blessing, not a burden. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man." God gave us the Lord's Day for our good. In our culture's hectic pace, we need time to stop, rest, worship, and focus on eternal things. Without such a day, we become consumed by the things of this world. The Lord's Day is God's gracious provision for our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It is harmful to our families and us when we ignore God’s gracious provision for our good. This blessed day is a gift, and as such, let us not refuse the Giver!

Finally, we should remember that the Lord's Day points us to the ultimate rest that awaits us. Hebrews 4:9 tells us, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God." Every Lord's Day reminds us that this world is not our home. Christians are pilgrims journeying toward eternal

rest. One day, all our labor will be done. One day, we will enter the presence of our Savior and rest from our works. Until that day, the Lord's Day gives us a weekly taste of that eternal rest.

Conclusion

To summarize and conclude our study, the Fourth Commandment calls us to remember the Lord's day and keep it holy. It reminds us that we are not merely workers, but worshippers created for fellowship with God. The commandment and the example God gave us are rooted in creation, when God rested on the seventh day and blessed it. Throughout Israel's history, the Sabbath served as a sign of the covenant between God and His people.

The Sabbath finds its fulfillment in Christ, who is the Lord of the Sabbath. Through His death and resurrection, He accomplished the work of redemption and entered into His rest. We enter that rest by faith, ceasing from our own works and trusting in His finished work. Following the biblical example of the Word of God, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, commemorates Christ's resurrection and offers us a weekly opportunity to worship Him and rest in Him.

For the Church today, the Lord's Day remains a gift from God. It is a day to gather with God's people for worship, to hear His Word, to celebrate the sacraments, and to encourage one another in our faith. As much as is possible, it is a day to rest from our ordinary labors and focus on eternal things. It is a foretaste of the eternal Sabbath rest that awaits all who are in Christ. Given this blessed day, let us, along with the prophet Isaiah, "call the Sabbath a delight."[32]

Dear reader, let us honor the Lord's Day faithfully, not as a burden but as a blessing. May we use the day as God intended, for worship, rest, and spiritual renewal. And may we look forward to that great day when our labors will be done, and we will enter into the eternal rest God has prepared for His people. As we keep the Lord's Day, we declare to family, neighbors, friends, and the watching world that we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, that our lives are ordered by His Word, and that our hope is in Him alone. To Him be glory forever. Amen.

"Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89).

[32] Isaiah 58:13-14.

The Fifth Commandment

Exodus 20:12

Study

This chapter examines the Fifth Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:12: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." This commandment bridges the first four commandments, which concern our duty to God, and the remaining five, which concern our duty to one another. By placing parents' honor above our duties to fellow human beings, God establishes the family as the foundational institution of human society. We will see that the Fifth Commandment requires far more than outward obedience from children. It calls for sincere and heartfelt reverence, respect, and care that extend throughout life. It applies to young children in the home, to adults caring for aging parents, and, by extension, to all who are placed in positions of legitimate authority.

Our study examines the theological significance of the commandment, its place within the broader structure of the Decalogue, its teaching on the family and authority, and its application to the Church today. The apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians, calls this "the first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2), highlighting both the importance of the obligation and the gracious blessing that comes with faithful obedience. For the believer, the Fifth Commandment reveals God’s design for human relationships and calls us to honor the authorities He has placed over us, beginning in the home and extending to every aspect of life.

Introduction

As we come to the Fifth Commandment, we arrive at a distinct turning point in the Decalogue. The first four commandments concern our relationship to God: whom we worship, how we worship, how we use His name, and how we keep His day. Now, beginning with the Fifth Commandment, God turns our attention to our relationships with one another. Yet even here, the commandment is not merely about human relationships. It is about honoring God by honoring the authorities He has established.

The Fifth Commandment reads, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." These words are simple and direct, yet their

implications are far-reaching. God has placed the command to honor parents at the head of the second table of the law.[33] I believe this is no accident. The family is the first and most basic institution God established. Before there was a church, before there was a government, before any other social structure, there was the family. God created Adam and Eve, joined them together, and told them to be fruitful and multiply. The family was God's idea from the beginning, and it remains the bedrock of human civilization.

Throughout Scripture, the relationship between parents and children mirrors deeper spiritual realities. God reveals Himself as our heavenly Father and calls His people His children. The love, discipline, and instruction that godly parents provide, however imperfectly, reflect the love, discipline, and instruction that God provides for His own. It is no wonder, then, that God places such importance on honoring the parent-child relationship. To dishonor one's parents is, in a very real sense, to dishonor God Himself, who established parental authority as a reflection of His own.

In our day, the family is under great attack from every direction. The culture around us increasingly downplays parental authority, creates rebellion, and redefines the very nature of the God-defined family. Children are taught to question and defy their parents. The elderly are neglected and treated as burdens rather than as a storehouse of wisdom and experience. The evil one delights in the breakdown of the traditional family structure. The Fifth Commandment addresses these issues and calls God's people to a radically different way of living, one that honors parents, respects authority, and reflects the character of God in our relationships.

The Meaning of the Commandment

The Hebrew word translated as "honor" in this commandment is *kabod*, which denotes weight, heaviness, or glory. It is the same root word used to describe God's glory. When God commands us to honor our parents, He is telling us to treat them as weighty, significant, and worthy of

[33] The "tables of the law" refer to the two stone tablets on which God wrote the Ten Commandments and gave them to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 31:18). The first table contains the first four commandments, which govern our relationship with God: having no other gods, making no graven images, not taking God's name in vain, and keeping the Sabbath holy. The second table contains the remaining six commandments, which govern our relationships with other people: honoring parents, not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness, and not coveting. The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," stands at the beginning of the second table, serving as the bridge between our duties to God and our duties to our fellow human beings.

respect and esteem. Matthew Henry captures the significance of this commandment well when he writes, "The fifth commandment is the first commandment with promise, as the apostle observes. The sum of it is, that we give honor to those to whom honor is due, in the several relations we stand in to them."[34] The opposite of honor is treating someone as light, trivial, or insignificant. To dishonor our parents is to treat them as if they do not matter, as if their role and their God-given authority carry no weight.

This honor encompasses several dimensions. One example is the importance of respect. Children are to show genuine respect for their parents, both in attitude and in action. This means speaking to and about them with courtesy and kindness. It also means listening to their instruction and receiving their correction with a teachable spirit. Proverbs 1:8 says, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching." The wise child recognizes that God has placed parents in their life for a purpose and receives their guidance with gratitude.

Another aspect is honor and obedience. For children still under their parents' care and authority, obedience is the primary way they demonstrate honor. Paul makes this explicit in Ephesians 6:1, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Obedience is not optional. It is the right and proper response of a child to the parents God has given. This obedience is to be given "in the Lord," meaning it flows from recognition that God Himself has established this authority structure for our good.

Honor also includes care and provision. As parents age and their strength diminishes, children are responsible for caring for them. This was well understood in the ancient world, where there were no government programs or retirement and nursing homes to support the elderly. Children were the means of support for their aging parents. The Lord Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for using a religious loophole to avoid caring for their parents. In Mark 7:10-13, He confronted them for declaring their resources "Corban" (devoted to God) to avoid the obligation to support their aging parents. Jesus called this a direct violation of the commandment and an example of how they made the word of God void by their traditions.

[34] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (1706; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 1:328.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 127, provides a thorough summary of the honor the Fifth Commandment requires. It states that the honor due to parents includes "all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defense, and maintenance of their persons and authority."[35] This is a comprehensive vision of what it means to honor father and mother.

The Family as God's Institution

To understand the Fifth Commandment properly, we must appreciate the place God has given to the family. The family is not a human invention. It is a divine institution, established by God at creation and placed into the very fabric of human existence. When God made man, He said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). God then created Eve and brought her to Adam, establishing the first marriage and the first family.

The family was designed to be the primary setting for raising, instructing, and nurturing children in the faith. God commanded the people of Israel to teach their children diligently. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, we read, "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." The home was meant to be the main school of faith, and parents were to be the primary teachers.

It is crucial to understand that this responsibility has never been assigned to the church, the school, or the government. While these institutions can help in the education and development of children, the primary duty for their spiritual upbringing rests with the parents. Ephesians 6:4 specifically instructs fathers, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Both fathers and mothers are called to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This is a sacred trust that God has entrusted to parents.

The family is also the setting where children first learn about authority, obedience, love, discipline, and forgiveness. How a child interacts with his or her parents influences how that

[35] Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 127 (1648)

child will later relate to teachers, employers, civil authorities, and even God Himself. A child who learns to honor and obey his or her parents is being prepared to live as a responsible, God-fearing member of society. Conversely, a child allowed to rebel against parental authority will likely carry that rebellious attitude into every other relationship.

John Calvin, commenting on this commandment, writes, "Since the Lord takes pleasure in the preservation of his own ordinance, the degrees of preeminence fixed by him ought to be held inviolable. The sum of it, therefore, will be that we ought to look up to those whom God has set over us and treat them with honor, obedience, and gratitude."[36] Calvin understood that the Fifth Commandment extends beyond the parent-child relationship to encompass all forms of divinely established authority. Yet it begins in the home, where we first encounter authority and learn to submit to it.

Honor Throughout the Whole of Life

It is important to recognize that the Fifth Commandment does not expire when a child reaches adulthood. The command to honor father and mother applies throughout life. While the nature of the honor may change as we grow to maturity, the obligation itself never ceases. A young child honors his parents primarily through obedience. An adult child honors his parents through respect, gratitude, and care.[37]

The Scriptures provide examples of honoring parents at every stage of life. Despite being sold into slavery by his brothers and enduring years of hardship in Egypt, Joseph honored his father Jacob with deep affection and care when they were reunited. He settled his father in the best of the land and provided for him throughout his remaining years (Genesis 47:11-12). Ruth, though not bound by blood to her mother-in-law Naomi, demonstrated extraordinary honor and devotion, saying, "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Her faithful love for Naomi is a wonderful example of the obedience of the Fifth Commandment.

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[36] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 11.

[37] Tragically, many adult children quickly place their aging parents in nursing homes. They often put convenience above the biblical call to honor through hands-on care, respect and gratitude. This often exchanges family responsibility for lonliness and sadness.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself provides the supreme example of honoring parents. As a child, He was subject to Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:51). Even in His final moments on the cross, amid unspeakable agony, He thought of His mother's welfare and entrusted her care to the apostle John. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:26-27). If the Son of God, even while bearing the sins of the world, took care to honor His earthly mother, how much more should we honor the parents God has given us?

Paul addresses this obligation directly in 1 Timothy 5:4, "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God." Caring for aging parents is not merely a cultural expectation. It is an act of godliness that pleases the Lord. Paul goes even further in verse 8, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." These sobering words underscore the seriousness with which God regards the care of family, especially aging parents.

The Broader Application to All Authority

While the Fifth Commandment specifically names father and mother, the Reformed tradition has consistently understood it to extend to all forms of legitimate, God-ordained authority. The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 124, explains that by "father and mother" the commandment means "not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth."[38] This broader understanding is deeply rooted in Scripture.

In the family, the Fifth Commandment calls children to honor parents and, by extension, grandparents and other family members who hold positions of care and authority. The church calls members to honor pastors, elders, and teachers who labor among them in the Word and doctrine. Paul instructs Timothy, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). The writer of

[38] Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 124 (1648)

Hebrews adds, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account" (Hebrews 13:17).

In our society, the Fifth Commandment calls citizens to honor governing authorities. Romans 13:1-2 states, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Peter likewise exhorts, "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Peter 2:17). Even when we disagree with those in authority, we are called to show proper respect and honor, recognizing that God has placed them in their positions for His purposes.

Of course, this honor and obedience have limits. When human authority directly contradicts God's clear command, we must obey God rather than man. The apostles demonstrated this principle when the Sanhedrin commanded them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Peter and the apostles responded, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). This is not rebellion. It is a higher obedience, an acknowledgment that all human authority is derived from God and must be exercised under His lordship. When authorities command what God forbids or forbid what God commands, the believer’s ultimate allegiance must be to Christ.

We see this principle at work in our own day. Consider the Christian physician who is called upon to provide abortion services. Though such procedures may be legal under governing authorities, the faithful physician recognizes that taking innocent life is a direct violation of the sixth commandment, 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13). Many godly physicians have rightly refused to participate in this evil practice, choosing to obey God rather than man, often at great personal and professional cost. Their stand is not one of lawlessness but of conscience, rooted in the conviction that no human law can be obeyed if it violates God’s law.

Violations of the Fifth Commandment

Scripture takes violations of the Fifth Commandment very seriously. Under the Mosaic law, the penalty for striking or cursing one’s parents was death. Exodus 21:15 states, "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death." Exodus 21:17 adds, "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." These severe penalties reveal how serious God regards dishonor toward parents. While the civil penalties of the Mosaic law are no longer in force for

the Church, the moral principle behind them remains. Dishonoring parents is a grievous sin in God's eyes. The famous 19th-century London preacher Charles Spurgeon emphasized the seriousness of this commandment when he declared, "I do not hesitate to say that next to blasphemy against God, there is no sin more exceedingly sinful than undutifulness to parents. It has ever been reckoned so. When Moses ordained laws for the government of Israel, the punishment of death was appointed for the man who cursed his father or his mother. Disobedience to parents is set side by side with the most heinous of crimes."[39]

The book of Proverbs repeatedly warns against despising or dishonoring parents. Proverbs 30:17 contains a vivid, serious warning: "The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures." Proverbs 20:20 says, "If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness." Proverbs 19:26 declares, "He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach." These passages leave no doubt that God views contempt for parents as a serious offense.

In the New Testament, Paul includes disobedience to parents among the characteristic sins of fallen humanity. In Romans 1:30, among the marks of those whom God has given over to a debased mind, Paul lists being "disobedient to parents." In 2 Timothy 3:2, describing the terrible conditions of the last days, Paul writes that people will be "disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy." We must note that disobedience to parents is placed alongside the most grievous of sins, a clear indication of how God views this evil practice.

We should also note that parents can violate the spirit of this commandment by provoking their children or failing in their duties. Paul’s instruction in Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger," recognizes that parents have a serious obligation to exercise their authority with love, wisdom, and gentleness. Parents who are harsh, unreasonable, neglectful, or abusive undermine the authority God has given them and make it more difficult for their children to honor this commandment. It is tragic to consider the terrible effects on mistreated and abused children in our society. The Fifth Commandment, when rightly understood, places

[39] Charles H. Spurgeon, "Honour Thy Father and Mother," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 9 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1863), 253.

responsibilities on both parents and children. Fatherless children in America have become epidemic in their proportion.

The following statistics, found in a blog titled "The Fatherless Generation,"[40] are heartbreaking.

- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes, at least five times the average.
- 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes, which is thirty-two times the average.
- 85% of all children who show behavior disorders come from fatherless homes, which is twenty times the average.
- 80% of rapists with anger problems come from fatherless homes, which is fourteen times the average.
- 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes, which is nine times the average.

Perhaps it goes without saying that we desperately need a spiritual awakening in America! We need the Holy Spirit to awaken lost sinners. Only His power can heal homes torn by divorce and abuse, and restore homes where children gladly honor their mother and father.

The First Commandment with a Promise

The apostle Paul emphasizes the promise associated with the Fifth Commandment. In Ephesians 6:2-3, he writes, "Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Paul is not suggesting that the other commandments lack blessings. However, the Fifth Commandment is unique because it includes a clear, stated promise of blessing directly linked to following it.

In its original context, the promise was tied to life in the Promised Land. Israel was about to enter Canaan, and God told them that the stability and longevity of their national life depended, in part, on the integrity of family relationships. A nation that honored parents and maintained

[40] Statistics," The Fatherless Generation (WordPress.com, April 27, 2010), https://thefatherlessgeneration.wordpress.com/statistics/.

strong families would enjoy God's blessing and prosper in the land. A nation that despised parental authority and allowed family structures to crumble would face decline and ultimately judgment.

The promise reaches beyond the individual. It doesn't imply that every obedient child will necessarily live a long life, but it conveys an enduring truth about God's moral order. When a society honors parents, respects its elders, and upholds strong family ties, it tends to flourish, growing in stability, prosperity, and blessing. But when families are broken, parental authority is dismissed, and the elderly are forgotten, that society begins to unravel. This is more than a sociological statement; it reflects the very design of God's creation.

Thomas Watson captures this well when he writes of the Fifth Commandment that honoring parents brings "a blessing upon the whole life. God often rewards obedient children with long life, prosperity, and honor. But even when He does not grant long life in this world, He gives what is better: eternal life in the world to come."[41] The ultimate promise of the Fifth Commandment, like all of God's promises, finds its fulfillment in Christ. Those who honor their parents out of faith in Christ are promised not merely earthly blessings but an eternal inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

The Fifth Commandment and Christ

As with every commandment, the Fifth Commandment ultimately points us to the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone perfectly fulfilled this command. From His earliest days, He honored His earthly parents. Luke tells us that after the incident in the temple at age twelve, "he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51). The eternal Son of God, through whom all things were made, willingly submitted Himself to the authority of His earthly parents. What a remarkable display of humility and obedience!

More profoundly, Jesus perfectly honored His heavenly Father throughout His entire earthly life. He declared, "I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:29). In the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the agony of the cross, He prayed, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). His obedience to the Father was complete, unwavering, and carried through to the very

[41] Watson, *Ten Commandments*, 133.

end. Philippians 2:8 tells us that "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Christ's perfect obedience to the Father is the very ground of our salvation.

We who trust in Christ are clothed in His righteousness. His perfect keeping of the Fifth Commandment, and indeed all the commandments, is credited to our account by faith. Where we have failed to honor our parents as we should, where we have been disobedient, disrespectful, or neglectful, Christ's perfect obedience covers our sin. This is the glorious truth of the gospel. We are not saved by our commandment keeping but by His. His righteousness becomes ours, and our guilt was laid upon Him at the cross.

Yet the gospel does not leave us unchanged. The same grace that forgives us also transforms us. The Holy Spirit works within believers to produce the fruit of obedience, including a growing desire to honor our parents and submit to legitimate authority. We keep this commandment not to earn God's favor but because His favor has already been lavished upon us in Christ. Our obedience is the fruit of gratitude, not the root of acceptance.

Application for the Church Today

How then should we apply the Fifth Commandment in our lives as Christians? The applications are many and very practical. We live in a time when family bonds are weakening, respect for elders is disappearing, and our culture celebrates self-determination above all else. The Fifth Commandment calls us to swim against this current.

For young children, the application is straightforward. Obey your parents. Listen to their instructions. Receive their correction with humility. Trust that God has placed them in your life for your good, even when their rules seem unreasonable or their discipline feels unpleasant. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

For adult children, the application takes different forms but is no less important. We must continue to treat our parents with respect, even when we no longer live under their roof or follow their daily direction. We should seek their counsel, value their wisdom, and express our gratitude

for the sacrifices they made on our behalf. As they age, we must be attentive to their needs, both physical and emotional. We must resist the temptation, so prevalent in our culture, to view elderly parents as inconveniences rather than as blessings.

For parents and grandparents, the Fifth Commandment carries a corresponding responsibility. We must exercise our authority in ways that make it easier, not harder, for our children to honor us. We must lead with love, instruct with patience, discipline with consistency, and model the Christian life before their eyes. We must avoid the extremes of harshness on one side and permissiveness on the other. Our goal should be to raise our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, pointing them to Christ in all that we say and do.

For the Church as a whole, the Fifth Commandment calls us to honor those whom God has placed in authority over us, whether in the church, the workplace, or civil government. We should pray for our leaders, submit to their lawful authority, and speak of them with respect, even when we disagree. This does not mean blind obedience. It means a respectful, God-honoring posture that recognizes God's sovereignty in all human affairs.

We must also be intentional about caring for the elderly in our congregations. James 1:27 tells us that "religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." The aged among us have much to offer, including their prayers, their wisdom, their example, and their faithfulness. We must not allow them to be forgotten or marginalized. Instead, we should honor them, learn from them, and ensure that they are cared for in their final years.

Conclusion

The Fifth Commandment stands at the intersection of our duty to God and our duty to one another. By commanding us to honor our parents, God establishes the family as the foundation of all human society and teaches us the fundamental principle of respect for divinely appointed authority. This commandment reaches into every stage of life and every sphere of human relationships, calling us to honor those whom God has placed over us, beginning with our fathers and mothers.

Throughout Scripture, the honor of parents is treated with the utmost seriousness. Violations of this commandment bring severe consequences, while faithful observance brings the promise of blessing. The commandment reveals God's heart for strong families, healthy communities, and a rightly ordered society in which authority is exercised with love and received with respect.

For the Church today, the Fifth Commandment calls us to resist the spirit of our age, which despises authority and celebrates independence from every form of accountability. We are called to something different, something better. We are called to honor our parents, care for the elderly, respect our leaders, and submit to the authority structures God has established, all while maintaining our ultimate allegiance to Christ alone.

Ultimately, the Fifth Commandment points us to Jesus Christ, who perfectly honored both His earthly parents and His heavenly Father. Through His obedience, He earned the righteousness that is credited to all who believe in Him. Through His death, He paid the penalty for every time we have failed to honor those God has placed over us. Through His Spirit, He enables us to grow in the grace of honoring others as He has honored the Father.

May we, by the grace of God, be found faithful in keeping this commandment. May we honor our parents with heartfelt respect and tender care. May we submit to lawful authority with a willing spirit. May we raise our children to know and love the Lord, building families that reflect the beauty of God's design. And may we look forward to that eternal day when every relationship will be made perfect, every authority rightly exercised, and every son and daughter of God will honor the Father in whose presence we will dwell forever. To Him be all glory, honor, and praise, both now and forevermore. Amen.

"The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love; teach me your statutes!" (Psalm 119:64)

The Sixth Commandment

Exodus 20:13

Study

This chapter examines the Sixth Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:13, which protects the sanctity of human life through the simple yet profound declaration, "You shall not murder." This commandment stands as an absolute barrier against the unlawful taking of human life, reflecting God's sovereign authority as the giver and sustainer of all life. The foundation of this commandment reaches back to creation itself, where God formed humanity in His own image and likeness, conferring upon every person inherent dignity and worth that must not be violated. The Hebrew word *ratsach*, translated "murder," specifically refers to unlawful killing, distinguishing this prohibition from capital punishment, just warfare, and legitimate self-defense, which God's law permits under proper authority.

We will explore the theological foundations of the commandment in God's creative work and the image of God in humanity, examine its comprehensive scope as expounded by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and consider contemporary applications, including abortion, euthanasia, and societal violence. The Lord Jesus revealed that this commandment reaches far beyond the physical act of killing to address the attitudes and actions that lead to murder, including anger, contempt, hatred, and verbal abuse. The commandment requires not only that we refrain from taking life but that we actively value, protect, and preserve it, pursuing peace, showing mercy, and demonstrating love even toward our enemies. For the Church, this commandment calls believers to examine their hearts for murderous attitudes while pointing ultimately to Jesus Christ, who perfectly fulfilled this law and bore the penalty for our disobedience through His sacrificial death on the cross.

Introduction

"You shall not murder." Four simple words that touch the very foundation of human existence and God’s authority. This commandment stands as an absolute barrier against the ultimate crime, the unlawful taking of human life. In a world where violence fills our news feeds and entertainment, where abortion destroys millions of unborn children, where euthanasia is increasingly promoted as compassionate care, and where hatred festers in human hearts, this

commandment speaks with urgent clarity. God alone is the author of life, and He alone has the right to determine when life ends.

The sixth commandment protects something precious beyond measure, human life created in the image of God. Like all the commandments, it reaches far deeper than the physical act of killing. It addresses the anger, hatred, and malice that murder in the heart long before hands commit violence. It calls us to value life, pursue peace, and love our neighbors as ourselves. In Christ, we find not only the perfect fulfillment of this command but also the power to overcome the murderous impulses of our sinful nature.

From the very beginning, God has been the giver and sustainer of life. He breathed into Adam the breath of life, and man became a living soul. Every heartbeat, every breath, every moment of existence comes from His creative and sustaining power. Life is His gift, and it remains under His sovereign control. When God placed humanity in the garden, He gave dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth. But nowhere did He grant humanity authority over human life itself. That belongs to God alone.

This commandment, therefore, is not merely a rule for social order, though it is that. It is not merely a necessity for the growth of humanity, though it is that as well. At its deepest level, this commandment is a declaration about the nature of God, the value of human life, and the boundaries of human authority. It reminds us that we are creatures, not the Creator. We are stewards of life, not its owners. We live and move and have our being in Him, and our days are numbered by His decree, not ours.

The Meaning of the Command

The Hebrew word translated "murder" in this commandment is *ratsach*, which specifically refers to the unlawful killing of another human being. This is not a blanket prohibition against all taking of life. The same law that forbids murder also prescribes capital punishment for certain crimes, authorizes warfare under specific circumstances, and permits killing in legitimate self-defense. The commandment targets the unauthorized, malicious destruction of human life, whether through premeditated murder, manslaughter arising from negligence or passion, or any other form of unlawful killing.

This distinction matters greatly. God's law recognizes that civil authorities bear the sword to punish evildoers, that soldiers may fight in just wars, and that individuals may defend themselves and others against violent attack. What the commandment forbids is personal vengeance, acts of violence based on hatred or rage, killings motivated by greed or jealousy, and the destruction of innocent life. At its heart, this commandment guards the principle that human life is sacred because humans alone bear God's image, and only God has the ultimate authority to give and take life.

The foundation for this commandment reaches back to creation itself. When God made humanity, He formed us in His own image and likeness. This divine image, though terribly marred by sin, remains stamped upon every human being. We are not merely intelligent animals or highly evolved primates. We are creatures uniquely fashioned to reflect God's character, to relate to Him personally, and to live forever. This image bearing dignity means that to murder another person is to assault God Himself, to destroy what He has made in His likeness, to usurp His sovereign authority over life and death.

After the flood, God established this principle explicitly with Noah. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Genesis 9:6). Here we see both the sanctity of human life and the serious consequences for violating it. Capital punishment for murder is not revenge but recognition that human life has such value that only another human life can atone for its unlawful destruction. The image of God in each person makes murder the gravest of crimes against humanity.

This image of God principle has many implications. It means that every human being, regardless of age, ability, race, or condition, possesses inherent dignity and worth. The unborn child in the womb bears God's image. The elderly person suffering from dementia bears God's image. The severely disabled individual bears God's image. The criminal on death row bears God's image. The enemy soldier bears God's image. Western culture has drifted far from the day when respect for human life was inherent in all. R. Albert Mohler Jr. comments about this trend. He writes, "The great liberal dream was that somehow you could have human rights and human dignity without Christianity. That somehow, while separating us from a biblical conception of what it means to be a human being, we can develop respect for one another, and human dignity could

prevail."[42] Our value does not come from our productivity, intelligence, physical abilities, beauty, or social standing. It comes from the simple fact that we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

In addition, this commandment reveals something essential about God's character. The God who forbids murder is the God who values life, who treasures His image bearers, and who grieves over death and destruction. He is not distant or indifferent to human suffering. He does not view human beings as disposable or expendable. Every life matters to Him. Every person is known to Him. Every death is weighed by Him. The psalmist declares that nothing can compare with God's thoughts towards those who trust in God.[43] He knows when we sit down and when we rise up. He discerns our thoughts from afar.[44] Such intimate knowledge and care form the backdrop for this commandment.

The Scope of the Command

While the primary meaning concerns physical killing, the scope of the sixth commandment extends much further. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed the heart of this law when He said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22).

The Lord Jesus traces murder back to its roots in the human heart. Anger, contempt, verbal abuse, these are the seedbed from which murder grows. The Pharisees prided themselves on never having committed murder, but their hearts seethed with hatred toward others. They cursed their enemies and harbored grudges. They may have kept their hands clean of blood, but their hearts were guilty of murder. Jesus exposes this hypocrisy and shows that God's law searches the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

[42] R. Albert Mohler Jr., address at the Ligonier National Conference, Orlando, FL, March 9, 2017.
[43] "You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you!" (Psalm 40:5).
[44] "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar" (Psalm 139:2).

The apostle John makes this connection even more explicit. "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15). We might say that hatred is murder in seed form. The person who maintains bitterness, who refuses to forgive, who wishes ill upon another, or who delights in another's misfortune violates the spirit of this commandment even if they never raise a hand in violence. God sees the heart, and in His sight, malicious thoughts are the moral equivalent of malicious deeds.

This means the commandment requires more than simply refraining from killing. In the sixth commandment, God demands that we actively value and protect human life. We must pursue peace, seek reconciliation, forgive those who wrong us, and love even our enemies. We must speak well of others, defend the defenseless, care for the vulnerable, and promote human flourishing. The sixth commandment calls us to be life givers, not life takers, peacemakers rather than troublemakers, reconcilers instead of dividers.

Consider how comprehensive this commandment becomes when we understand its full scope. It forbids not only the physical act of murder but also the attitudes and actions that lead to murder. It condemns anger that is nursed and cultivated rather than quickly resolved. It prohibits contempt, that attitude of superiority and disdain that views others as worthless or beneath consideration. It forbids insulting and abusive language that tears down rather than builds up. It condemns malicious gossip and slander that destroy reputations and relationships.

But the commandment goes even further. It requires positive action to preserve and protect life. The Westminster Larger Catechism, in explaining this commandment, lists not only what is forbidden but also what is required. We are commanded to preserve our own lives and the lives of others, to resist all thoughts and purposes that threaten life, to use lawful means for preserving life, to show mercy and compassion, to be peacemakers, and to bear the hand of God patiently in any affliction He sends.

This positive dimension of the commandment shapes how, by the grace of God, we ought to live. We should care for our own health and safety, not recklessly endangering ourselves through foolish behavior or sinful habits. We should care for the health and safety of others, warning them of danger, helping them in times of need, and providing for those who cannot provide for themselves. We should advocate for the weak and vulnerable. To be sure, none of us, apart from

Christ, has kept or can keep this command perfectly. But the law remains a rule of life that guides the believer in grateful obedience.

Contemporary Applications

In our modern context, this commandment speaks to several pressing issues. First and most urgently, it condemns abortion as the murder of innocent human life. From the moment of conception, a unique human being exists, fashioned by God in His image, possessing an eternal soul, and deserving of protection. The unborn child is not merely potential life or a clump of cells. He or she is a person, fearfully and wonderfully made, known to God before formation in the womb.

The biblical testimony on this point is clear and consistent. The psalmist declares, "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:13–14a). God's creative work begins at conception, not at birth. Jeremiah records God's word to him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jeremiah 1:5a). John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb at the presence of the unborn Jesus. Throughout Scripture, the unborn are treated as persons, as human beings with identity and value.

The arguments for abortion, whether based on convenience, economics, or even cases of rape or severe fetal abnormality, cannot override the fundamental truth that God alone has the right to give and take life. We do not become the Creator by choosing which lives have value and which do not. The destruction of more than sixty million unborn children in America since 1973 represents a holocaust of staggering proportions, a national sin that cries out to heaven for justice. Christians must speak clearly and act courageously to defend these most vulnerable members of our society.

This does not mean we respond to women facing crisis pregnancies with condemnation or harshness. Rather, we are called to show compassion, to offer practical help, to support adoption as an alternative, to provide resources for young mothers, and to create a culture that truly values both mother and child. We must be willing to put our resources where our convictions are, supporting pregnancy centers, foster care, and adoption agencies. We must also work for legal

protections for the unborn while ministering with grace to those who have been wounded by abortion.

In addition, the commandment addresses euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. The modern movement to legalize the killing of the elderly, the disabled, and the suffering represents a fundamental rejection of God's sovereignty and the sanctity of human life. We do not have the right to end our own lives or to help others end theirs, regardless of the pain or difficulty they face. Life is God's gift, and He alone determines when it should end. Our calling is to provide compassionate care, effective pain management, and loving presence to those who suffer, not to assist in their deaths.

The arguments for euthanasia often rest on appeals to autonomy, dignity, and compassion. But true dignity does not come from our ability to control the circumstances of our death. It comes from bearing the image of God, a dignity that remains regardless of our physical or mental condition. And true compassion does not kill the suffering; it comforts them, cares for them, and walks with them through the valley of the shadow of death. The rise of hospice care and palliative medicine shows that we can address pain and suffering without resorting to intentionally ending life.

The sixth commandment also speaks to issues of violence in our society. While recognizing the legitimacy of capital punishment and just warfare, Christians should be committed to peace, to the resolution of conflicts through lawful means, and to the protection of human life. We should oppose acts of terrorism, hate crimes, gang violence, and all forms of assault. We should work for justice while refusing to take vengeance into our own hands. We should support law enforcement while also advocating for the fair and humane treatment of all people.

In our personal relationships, this commandment calls us to examine our hearts for anger, bitterness, and malice. Do we harbor grudges against those who have wronged us? Do we refuse to forgive? Do we speak harshly or abusively to others? Do we gossip or slander? Do we wish harm upon our enemies? These attitudes and actions violate the spirit of the sixth commandment. We must repent of them and seek God's grace to love others as Christ has loved us.

The commandment also has implications for how we use our words. James warns us that the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness, setting on fire the entire course of life. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. Our words have the power to give life or to kill. They can build up or tear down, encourage or discourage, heal or wound. When we use our words to attack, demean, or destroy others, we violate the spirit of this commandment.

Our Failure and God's Grace

If we are honest, we must confess our guilt before this commandment. Even if we have never physically harmed another person, we have all been angry without cause. We have all spoken harsh words. We have all harbored resentment and refused to forgive. We have all, in thought if not in deed, wished ill upon others. By the standard Jesus sets, by the requirement to love perfectly and constantly, we all stand condemned as murderers in our hearts.

The problem runs deeper than isolated acts of anger or hatred. It goes to the very core of our fallen nature. Jeremiah declares that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.[45] Jesus teaches that from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. We are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. The seeds of murder lie dormant in every human heart, waiting for the right circumstances to sprout.

Moreover, we have often failed to value and protect life as we should. We have been silent when we should have spoken for the unborn. We have ignored the suffering of others when we could have helped. We have been indifferent to injustice and violence. We have failed to be peacemakers and reconcilers. Our sins of omission are as real as our sins of commission, and they too make us guilty before God's holy law.

Consider how many times we have failed to show mercy when mercy was needed. How many times have we passed by on the other side like the priest and Levite in Jesus' parable, leaving the wounded to suffer alone? How many times have we withheld forgiveness when forgiveness was sought? How many times have we chosen our comfort over another person's need? How many

[45] Jeremiah 17:9

times have we valued our possessions, our time, our preferences above the welfare of our neighbor?

The commandment also exposes our failure to love our enemies. Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. But we find this impossibly difficult. We want to return evil for evil, insult for insult. We want those who wrong us to suffer. We take pleasure in their misfortune. We refuse to forgive and refuse to forget. We nurse our grievances and rehearse our wrongs. In doing so, we prove ourselves guilty of violating this commandment in its fullest sense.

But here again, the gospel shines with glorious light. Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled this commandment in our place. He never harbored anger or malice. He never spoke a word in hatred. He blessed those who cursed Him and prayed for those who persecuted Him. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He was the perfect peacemaker, the ultimate reconciler, the one who gave His own life to save others.

Consider the remarkable restraint and love Jesus showed throughout His earthly ministry. When the soldiers came to arrest Him in Gethsemane, Peter drew his sword and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. Jesus immediately healed the man and rebuked Peter, saying, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). He could have called down twelve legions of angels to defend Him, but He chose instead to submit to arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

More than that, Jesus bore the penalty for our violation of this commandment. All our anger, all our hatred, all our malice, all our violence of thought and word and deed, He carried to the cross. The innocent one died for the guilty. The life giver suffered death. The Prince of Peace endured the violence of crucifixion. And in His death, He made atonement for our sins, satisfying God's justice and opening the way for our forgiveness and reconciliation.

When we trust in Christ, His perfect obedience to this commandment is credited to our account. God sees us not as murderers but as righteous, not as hate-filled but as loving, not as guilty but as forgiven. We are justified, declared righteous in God's sight, based on Christ's work rather than

our own. This is the heart of the gospel: Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves.

The cross demonstrates both God's hatred of sin and His love for sinners. He did not simply overlook our violations of this commandment. He did not minimize our guilt or excuse our failures. Justice demanded payment, and payment was made. But the payment came from God Himself, in the person of His Son, who willingly took our place and bore our punishment. This is love beyond comprehension, grace beyond measure, mercy beyond understanding.

Living in Light of the Command

For those who have been saved by grace through faith in Christ, this commandment now becomes a guide for grateful obedience. The Holy Spirit who indwells us gives us both the desire and the power to love others as Christ has loved us. We are called to put away anger, bitterness, and malice, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to seek peace and pursue it, to value every human life as precious in God's sight.

This means we must guard our hearts against the seeds of murder. When anger arises, we must deal with it quickly, refusing to let the sun go down on our wrath. Paul commands us, "Be angry and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). Anger itself is not always sinful; there is such a thing as righteous anger against injustice and evil. But anger must be controlled, directed properly, and resolved quickly, before it turns into bitterness and hatred.

When someone wrongs us, we must forgive, remembering the vast debt God has forgiven us in Christ. Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant who, after being forgiven an enormous debt, refused to forgive his fellow servant a tiny debt. The master's response is severe, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Forgiveness is not optional for the Christian. It is the necessary response of those who have themselves been forgiven.

When tempted to speak harshly, we must choose words that build up rather than tear down. Paul instructs us, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). Our

words should minister grace, encourage faith, strengthen the weak, comfort the sorrowful, and point others to Christ. This requires intentionality and self-control, a willingness to pause before speaking and to consider the effect our words will have.

When confronted with injustice, we must act with courage while refusing to take vengeance into our own hands. Paul writes, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Romans 12:19-20). We pursue justice through proper channels while showing mercy and kindness even to those who wrong us.

We must also actively promote and protect human life. This includes supporting the unborn through pregnancy centers, adoption services, and legal advocacy. It includes caring for the elderly, the disabled, and the suffering through hospice care, practical assistance, and loving presence. It includes working for justice and peace in our communities, supporting law enforcement, and advocating for the fair treatment of all people.

In our families, this commandment calls us to create homes marked by peace, forgiveness, and mutual respect. Husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the church, never using harsh words or physical force. Wives must respect their husbands, speaking with kindness and grace. Parents must discipline their children without exasperation or abuse, remembering that they too are image bearers of God. Children must honor their parents without resentment or rebellion. The family should be a place where life is nurtured and protected, where conflicts are resolved through forgiveness, where every member is valued and loved.

In the church, we must be committed to unity and peace. We must refuse to gossip or slander. We must speak the truth in love. We must bear with one another's weaknesses and forgive one another's offenses. We must pursue reconciliation when conflicts arise. We must care for those who are hurting and defend those who are vulnerable. The church should be known as a community where life is cherished and love abounds, where the world can see the transforming power of the gospel in our relationships with one another.

This also means we should be known for our gentleness and self-control. Peter instructs us to be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that is in us, but to do so

with gentleness and respect. Our defense of truth should never come at the expense of love. Our zeal for righteousness should never degenerate into harsh judgmentalism. Our commitment to biblical standards should never lead us to treat others with contempt or cruelty.

The Ultimate Life Giver

As we reflect on the sixth commandment, we are pointed ultimately to Christ, who is Himself the resurrection and the life. He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. He laid down His life for His sheep. He conquered death and rose from the grave, breaking the power of sin and Satan. In Him, we who were dead in our trespasses and sins have been made alive. We who deserved death have been given eternal life.

This is the heart of the Christian gospel. We were spiritually dead, enslaved to sin, condemned by God's law, destined for eternal judgment. But Christ, in His great love, came to rescue us. He lived the life we should have lived, keeping every commandment perfectly. He died the death we deserved to die, bearing the penalty for our sins. He rose from the dead, conquering sin and death and hell. And now He offers forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life to all who trust in Him.

When we believe in Christ, we are born again, made new creatures, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and adopted into God's family. The old has passed away, the new has come. We who were once characterized by anger, hatred, and malice are now being transformed into the image of Christ, growing in love, patience, and kindness. We who once gave death now give life, we who once sowed discord now make peace, we who once harbored bitterness now extend forgiveness.

This transformation is not instantaneous or automatic. It is a process, a lifelong journey of sanctification in which we are being conformed to the likeness of Christ. We still struggle with anger and selfishness. We still fail to love as we should. We still need daily forgiveness and grace. But the Spirit who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion. The God who saved us will also sanctify us. The Christ who died for us will also transform us.

The promise of resurrection life gives us hope in the midst of a death filled world. We live in a fallen world where violence and hatred seem to triumph, where the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper, where death appears to have the final word. But we know that death's reign is

temporary. Christ has conquered death, and one day He will return to make all things new. The graves will open, the dead will rise, and death itself will be thrown into the lake of fire.

One day, when Christ returns and resurrection morning dawns, this transformation will be complete. We will be fully conformed to His image, perfectly holy, completely free from sin and death. We will live forever in the new heavens and new earth, where there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, where death itself will be no more, where the lion will lie down with the lamb and swords will be beaten into plowshares. Until that day, we live in hope, knowing that He who promised is faithful and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In that day, this commandment will no longer be needed, for there will be no murder, no hatred, no violence, no death. All who dwell in the new creation will love perfectly, forgive completely, and live in peace eternally. We will see Christ face to face, the One who is the author and giver of life, and we will worship Him forever. This is our great hope, this is our certain future, this is the promise that sustains us as we seek to live faithfully in obedience to this commandment.

Conclusion

The sixth commandment, "You shall not murder," reveals both our sin and our Savior. It shows us the sanctity of human life and the seriousness of destroying it. It exposes the hatred in our hearts and calls us to love. It condemns our anger and bitterness while pointing us to the One who forgave His murderers from the cross. It demands perfect love for our neighbors while declaring that Christ has loved us perfectly.

As we examine ourselves in light of this commandment, we must confess our guilt. We have failed to value life as God values it. We have harbored anger and refused to forgive. We have spoken harshly and acted maliciously. We stand condemned by God's holy law and deserving of His judgment. But in Christ, we find forgiveness, righteousness, and life. He has kept this commandment in our place. He has borne the penalty for our violations. He has given us His Spirit to transform us from the inside out.

May we then live in light of this great salvation. May we value every human life as precious in God's sight. May we put away anger and bitterness. May we forgive as we have been forgiven.

May we pursue peace and seek reconciliation. May we speak words that give life rather than death. May we be known as people who love others as Christ has loved us. And may our lives bear witness to the One who is the resurrection and the life, who died that we might live, and who will one day make all things new.

This commandment calls us to something far greater than mere external conformity to a rule. It calls us to a transformation of heart that can only come through the power of the gospel. It calls us to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, to give life as life has been given to us. May God grant us grace to live in obedience to this commandment, not in our own strength but in the strength that comes from Christ, the ultimate life-giver, who loved us and gave Himself for us.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

The Seventh Commandment

Exodus 20:14

Study

This chapter examines the Seventh Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:14, which addresses the sanctity of marriage and the sin of adultery. The commandment declares, "You shall not commit adultery," establishing God's design for sexual purity and marital faithfulness. Throughout Scripture, marriage is presented as a sacred covenant between one man and one woman, reflecting the relationship between Christ and His Church. The Seventh Commandment protects this God-ordained institution by forbidding any sexual activity outside the marriage bond. This prohibition extends beyond the physical act of adultery to encompass lustful thoughts, improper desires, and any behavior that violates the exclusive nature of the marriage covenant.[46] The commandment reveals God's holy standard for sexual conduct and His concern for the welfare of families, the foundation of society. For the Church, this commandment calls believers to pursue purity in thought and deed, to honor marriage as God has ordained it, and to flee from all forms of sexual immorality.

Introduction

Marriage stands as one of the first institutions God established in human history.[47] Before government, before the church, before any other human relationship, God created marriage. In Genesis 2:24, we read, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This foundational statement declares God's design for marriage, a lifelong, exclusive union between one man and one woman. Everything that follows in Scripture regarding human sexuality must be understood in light of this original design.

The Seventh Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," protects the sanctity of this marriage covenant. In giving this command, God establishes a boundary line that must not be

[46] Matthew 5:27-30

[47] Marriage is one of the creation ordinances. These are universal mandates given by God before sin entered the world and regardless of the fall binding on all humanity. These include labor, the sabbath, and marriage (Genesis 2:18-24), designed to regulate human relationships and society under God's good order.

crossed. He declares that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively within the marriage relationship and that violations of this principle bring serious consequences both in this life and in eternity.

Throughout the history of redemption, marriage has served as a picture of the relationship between God and His people. In the Old Testament, the prophets frequently portrayed Israel's unfaithfulness to God as spiritual adultery. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul explicitly teaches that human marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and the Church. Ephesians 5:31-32 states, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Marriage, therefore, carries significance far beyond the happiness of two individuals. It testifies to divine truth and reflects eternal realities.

In our present age, the biblical understanding of marriage and sexuality has been largely abandoned. Sexual immorality is celebrated, marital unfaithfulness is excused, and God's moral law is dismissed as outdated and oppressive. Yet the Seventh Commandment remains as relevant and necessary today as when it was first given to Moses at Mount Sinai. God and His standards have not changed, nor has the human heart's capacity for self-deception and sin. The church must continue to proclaim God's holy law while extending the hope of forgiveness and transformation through Jesus Christ.

The Meaning of Adultery

The Hebrew word translated "adultery" in Exodus 20:14 refers specifically to sexual relations between a married person and someone who is not their spouse. In the ancient Near Eastern context, this commandment primarily protected the marriage covenant from violation. Under the Mosaic law, both the adulterer and the adulteress were to be put to death, demonstrating the severity of this sin in God's eyes. John Murray, in his classic work *Principles of Conduct*, comments on the severity of this sin. He writes, “The severity of the penalty for adultery in the Mosaic law is the index to the enormity of the sin. It is a sin which strikes at the most sacred human relationship and at the foundation of human society. The family is the basic unit of social organization, and the sanctity of marriage is essential to its integrity."[48]

[48] John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 54.

Leviticus 20:10 states, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." This penalty highlights the gravity of the offense. Adultery was not merely a private matter between individuals but a crime against God, a violation of His covenant, and an assault on the foundations of society. The death penalty served both as punishment and as a deterrent, warning the people of Israel that sexual unfaithfulness would not be tolerated.

However, we must understand that the Seventh Commandment encompasses more than just the physical act of adultery. The Lord Jesus Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, expanded our understanding of this commandment to include the thoughts and desires of the heart. In Matthew 5:27-28, He declared, "You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Bishop J.C. Ryle, commenting on the Lord's words, wrote, "Our Lord Jesus Christ declares that the commandment is broken by the look of the eye when that look is the result of an impure desire within. He that looks at a woman with a lustful eye has already in God's sight committed adultery in his heart. The act is morally complete, though not outwardly performed. The sin is finished in the sight of Him who reads the inward man. God takes knowledge of thoughts and imaginations. He does not wait until iniquity is actually committed. An unholy thought conceived and entertained is sin in His sight."[49]

This teaching reveals that God's law judges not only outward actions but also the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. A person may refrain from the physical act of adultery while having lustful thoughts and desires. Such a person may appear righteous before others but stands condemned before God, who searches the heart. The Pharisees excelled at external conformity while their hearts remained far from God. Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and called for righteousness that goes beyond mere outward conformity. How self-deceived is the sinful heart of man to think that keeping the Law externally somehow gains favor in the eyes of a Holy God who knows our inmost thoughts!

[49] J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew* (1856; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1986), 42.

The Westminster Larger Catechism Question 139 provides a helpful summary of what the Seventh Commandment requires: "The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel; marriage by those that have not the gift of continency, conjugal love, and cohabitation; diligent labor in our callings; shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations thereunto."[50] This comprehensive answer shows that the commandment calls for purity in every aspect of life, not merely avoiding the physical act of adultery.

God's Design for Marriage

To understand the Seventh Commandment properly, we must first grasp God's original design for marriage. When God created Adam, He declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). God then created Eve from Adam's rib and brought her to him. Adam's response expressed both recognition and joy: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23).

The Genesis text then provides the foundational statement on marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). This verse teaches several crucial truths about marriage. First, marriage requires leaving one's parents and establishing a new family unit. Second, it involves a man holding fast to his wife, implying permanence and exclusivity. Third, the two become one flesh, indicating the profound unity that marriage creates.

This original design reveals that marriage is, by definition, the union of one man and one woman. God created humanity as male and female, and He ordained marriage as the proper context for sexual union. No other relationship can legitimately be called marriage, regardless of what human courts or cultures may declare. The creation account establishes marriage as a divine institution with boundaries set by God Himself.

[50] *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), Q. 139.

In our present age, we are witnessing an unprecedented assault on this foundational truth. Modern culture has attempted to redefine not only marriage but the very categories of male and female that God established at creation. What God has clearly distinguished, our society now claims is changeable and subject to personal choice. The same rebellious spirit that rejects God's definition of marriage also denies His creation of humanity as male and female. This is not progress but regression, producing chaos and confusion. When society abandons God's design for marriage and gender, it does not create freedom but disorder, not liberation but bondage to sin. The church must stand firm on the truth that God alone has the authority to define marriage, sexuality, and human identity. His Word is not subject to change by human opinion or cultural consensus.

Marriage also serves multiple purposes in God's plan. It provides companionship. Adam needed a helper fit for him, someone with whom he could share life and labor. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 speaks of the value of companionship: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"

Marriage also provides the proper context for sexual intimacy. First Corinthians 7:2-3 states, "But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband." Sexual relations within marriage are not merely permitted but commanded, a gift from God to be enjoyed with thanksgiving and purity.

Additionally, marriage is designed for procreation. God's first command to humanity was to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Children are a heritage from the Lord, a blessing to be received with gratitude. While not every marriage results in children, the procreative potential of a husband and wife reflects God's creative purposes.

Marriage also pictures the relationship between Christ and the Church. This profound truth, revealed in the New Testament, gives marriage its deepest significance. As Christ gave Himself for the Church and the Church submits to Christ, so husbands are to love their wives sacrificially

and wives are to respect and submit to their husbands. This parallel transforms our understanding of marriage from a mere human contract to a living parable of divine love.[51]

The Seriousness of Adultery

Scripture consistently presents adultery as a grievous sin with devastating consequences. Proverbs 6:32-33 warns, "He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself. He will get wounds and dishonor, and his reproach will not be wiped away." The consequences of adultery extend far beyond the immediate act, affecting the adulterer's reputation, relationships, and spiritual well-being.

The Old Testament records numerous examples of the destructive power of adultery. David's adultery with Bathsheba resulted in the death of their first child, violence within David's own household, and the sword never departing from his house (2 Samuel 12:10,14). Though David repented and received forgiveness, the temporal consequences of his sin continued throughout his life. Psalm 51, David's great confession of sin, reveals the anguish of a soul convicted of adultery and murder.

In Proverbs 5:3 and 5, Solomon warns against the adulterous woman: "For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol." The imagery is vivid and sobering. What may appear attractive and pleasurable in the moment ultimately leads to spiritual death. The momentary pleasure of sin cannot compare to the lasting damage it inflicts. If we are Christians, we must treasure fellowship and peace with God more than the passing pleasures of sin.

The New Testament is equally clear about the seriousness of adultery. In Matthew 15:19, Jesus listed adultery among the evil things that come from the heart and defile a person. In Galatians 5:19,21, Paul identified adultery as one of the works of the flesh and warned, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." This is not to say that those who commit adultery cannot be forgiven, but it does indicate that unrepentant, habitual adultery demonstrates a heart that has not been transformed by grace.

[51] Ephesians 5:22-33

Hebrews 13:4 declares, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." God's judgment awaits those who persist in sexual immorality without repentance. This sobering truth should cause us to take the Seventh Commandment with utmost seriousness.

Beyond the spiritual consequences, adultery destroys trust, damages families, and harms innocent people, especially children. When a husband or wife breaks the marriage covenant through unfaithfulness, the resulting pain radiates outward, affecting not only the couple but their children, extended family, and even the church family. The violation of trust can take years to heal, if it heals at all in this life. Some marriages survive adultery through genuine repentance and forgiveness, but the scars often remain.

Sexual Immorality in Our Age

While the Seventh Commandment specifically addresses adultery, it also includes all forms of sexual immorality. The Greek word "porneia," used throughout the New Testament, refers broadly to sexual sin of every kind. This includes fornication, that is, sexual relations between unmarried persons, as well as homosexual behavior, incest, bestiality, and all other deviations from God's created design for sexuality.

First Corinthians 6:18,20 commands, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Sexual sin is unique in that it involves the body in a particularly intimate way. Because believers' bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, sexual immorality defiles what God has set apart for Himself.

We live in an age of rampant sexual immorality. What previous generations considered shameful is now openly celebrated. Sex before marriage is assumed to be normal. Adultery is excused and often sought out. The internet has made pornography readily available and widely consumed. Homosexual behavior, once universally condemned in Christian societies, is now affirmed and promoted. In many countries, annual parades are held to show “pride” in their immoral lifestyle. Marriage itself is being redefined to include relationships that God's Word clearly condemns.

God's Word reveals to us His judgment. The Word of God does not remain silent about such things. The Psalmist described the spirit of our age precisely when he wrote, "On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the children of man" (Psalm 12:8).

In the last section of chapter one of the letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul provides a vivid description of the behaviors of those who have rejected the Word of God. He writes, "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them" (Romans 1:32). Not only do so many practice behaviors God hates, but those who do *not* practice them now also approve of those who do! This is the culture of America today, and without a doubt, many other countries. How fitting are the words of the Psalmist when he writes, "The nations have sunk in the pit that they have made; in the net that they hid, their own foot has been caught. The LORD has made himself known; he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their hands" (Psalm 9:15-16). Dear Christian, let us cry out to our great God for His mercy and grace!

The church has not been immune to this cultural shift. Many professing Christians see nothing wrong with sexual activity before marriage. Others justify divorce for reasons beyond the biblical grounds of adultery or abandonment. Still others have embraced the culture's acceptance of homosexuality, arguing that love justifies any consensual relationship. Such positions represent a fundamental rejection of biblical authority and God's clear moral standards. Instead of being a light on a hill for all to see, many believers have covered their lights to the great detriment of our culture!

Albert Mohler Jr. summarizes the current tragedy we face in our culture. He writes, "The moral revolution of our times represents nothing less than a complete reversal of Christian sexual morality. What was once forbidden is now celebrated. What was once shameful is now a matter of pride. The very categories of male and female, the institution of marriage, and the integrity of the family are now considered negotiable. This revolution did not happen overnight, but it has reached a point of cultural saturation. The church now faces a test of faithfulness unlike anything

seen in recent centuries. Will we bend to the spirit of the age, or will we stand firm on the Word of God?"[52]

The effects of widespread sexual immorality are devastating. Families are fractured. Children grow up without both parents. Sexually transmitted diseases continue to spread. Emotional and psychological damage affects millions. Yet our society continues down the same path, refusing to acknowledge that God's ways are best and that His commandments are given for our good. Christians must pray that God the Holy Spirit would come in power to awaken multitudes to their sin and to the need for the Savior.

Romans 1:24,26,27 describes God's judgment on sexual immorality: "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." When a society persistently rejects God's standards, He gives them over to their sinful desires, allowing them to experience the natural consequences of their rebellion.

Guarding Against Temptation

Given the seriousness of sexual sin, remaining sin, and the pervasiveness of sexual temptation in our culture, how can believers guard themselves? Scripture provides clear instructions on this vital matter.

It is vital that the Christian recognize the deceitfulness of sin. Sexual temptation often begins with seemingly innocent thoughts or actions. A second glance becomes a lustful look. A casual conversation becomes an emotional attachment. What starts as curiosity about pornography develops into lustful addiction. Hebrews 3:13 warns us to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Sin promises pleasure but delivers death. It appears harmless, but leads to destruction.

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[52] R. Albert Mohler Jr., *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 17-18.

In addition, we must guard our hearts and minds. Proverbs 4:23 instructs, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." What we allow into our minds through entertainment, media, and conversation will affect our hearts. If we fill our minds with impure images and ideas, we should not be surprised when sinful desires take root. Philippians 4:8 provides the positive alternative: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." The Puritan Thomas Watson wisely observed, "The first rise of sin is in the mind. The mind is the shop where sin is framed and contrived. All mischief is first hatched there and then brought forth."[53] This insight underscores why believers must be diligent about what they allow into their minds. As has often been said, today's thoughts become tomorrow's actions.

Guarding against temptation also means avoiding situations that create opportunities for it. First Thessalonians 5:22 says, "Abstain from every form of evil." Joseph's response to Potiphar's wife provides a model for us. When she attempted to seduce him, he refused her advances and eventually fled from her presence (Genesis 39:7,12). He understood that remaining in her presence would only increase the danger. We must be equally willing to flee from situations that put us at risk of sexual sin.

Another duty is to actively pursue purity. Writing to his young protégé Timothy, the Apostle Paul commands him in 2 Timothy 2:22, "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." Purity is not merely the absence of impurity but the active pursuit of holiness. We must cultivate godly desires, develop accountability relationships, and fill our lives with pursuits that honor God.

Finally, we must remember that we are not our own. First Corinthians 6:19-20 declares, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Our bodies belong to God by both creation and redemption. We have no right to use them in

[53] Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good* (1663; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 91.

ways that dishonor Him. This truth should motivate us to pursue holiness in all areas of life, including our sexuality.

The Hope of the Gospel

The law of God, including the Seventh Commandment, shows us our sin and our need for a Savior. No one can claim to have kept this commandment perfectly. Even if we have not committed physical adultery, we have all sinned in our thoughts and desires. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:27-28 leaves no room for self-righteousness. We all stand condemned before God's holy Law.

Yet this is exactly where the gospel brings hope. Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, perfectly kept every commandment on behalf of His people. He never entertained a lustful thought. He never looked at another with impure desires. He remained perfectly pure in thought, word, and deed throughout His entire earthly life. This perfect righteousness is credited to all who trust in Him by faith.

Moreover, Christ bore the punishment for our sexual sins on the cross. The wrath that our adultery, fornication, and lustful thoughts deserved fell upon Him. He suffered and died so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. First Peter 2:24 declares, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

The gospel also brings the power to overcome sin. Those who are in Christ have been given the Holy Spirit, who works within them to transform their desires and strengthen them against temptation. First Corinthians 6:9,11 lists various sins, including sexual immorality and adultery, and then declares, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Past sin does not determine our identity! Through Christ, we can be washed clean and empowered to live in purity.

This does not mean that the struggle against sexual temptation will be easy or that victory will be immediate and complete. Remaining sin continues to wage war against the new nature that

believers have received in Christ. But it does mean that we have hope. We are not slaves to our passions. We have been set free to serve God in righteousness and holiness.

For those who have fallen into sexual sin, even grievous sin like adultery, there is hope for restoration through genuine repentance. David committed adultery and murder, yet when he truly repented, God forgave him. Psalm 51:1-2 records his prayer: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" God did forgive David, though the consequences of his sin remained. The same mercy is available to all who come to God with genuine repentance and faith in Christ.

Application for the Church Today

How then should the church apply the Seventh Commandment in our current cultural context? There are several practical applications that follow from our study.

To begin with, the church must teach clearly and consistently about God's design for marriage and sexuality. We cannot assume that people, even those raised in the church, understand biblical sexual ethics. The culture's messages are loud and persistent. The church's voice must be equally clear and grounded in Scripture. We must teach that marriage is between one man and one woman, that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively within marriage, and that all other sexual activity is sin. We must teach and preach what the Word of God teaches us in this area.

We must prepare young people for marriage and help them maintain purity before marriage. This includes teaching them to guard their hearts and minds, to avoid situations that create temptation, and to view their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. We must also help them understand that sexual desire is not sinful in itself but is a good gift from God to be expressed within the bounds He has established.

Also, the church must support and strengthen marriages. We should provide marriage enrichment opportunities, counseling for struggling couples, and biblical teaching on the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. Strong marriages serve as a testimony to the watching world and provide stability for the next generation.

In addition, we must exercise church discipline when members persist in unrepentant sexual sin. While this is an unpopular topic in our age, Scripture is clear that the church has a responsibility to maintain purity among its members. First Corinthians 5 provides instruction on dealing with sexual immorality within the church. The goal of such discipline is always restoration, calling the sinning member to repentance so that they may be restored to fellowship.

Christians should extend compassion and hope to those who struggle with sexual sin. The church should be a place where people can confess their struggles and find support in overcoming them. We must avoid both excusing sin and withholding mercy from those who fall. Jesus demonstrated perfect balance, showing compassion to sinners while calling them to repentance and holy living. This includes helping those wounded by sexual sin, whether as victims of abuse or as spouses who have experienced betrayal. The church should be a place of healing where wounded people can find comfort, support, and practical help as they seek to recover from the damage caused by sin.

Ultimately, we must remember that our hope is not in our ability to keep God's law but in Christ's perfect obedience and sacrifice on our behalf. We preach the law to show people their need for the gospel. We preach the gospel to offer them hope and transformation. Both are essential. Both must be proclaimed with clarity and conviction.

Conclusion

The Seventh Commandment stands as God's protection for marriage and His standard for sexual purity. In commanding, "You shall not commit adultery," God establishes a boundary that must not be crossed. He declares that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively within the marriage covenant between one man and one woman and that violations of this principle carry serious consequences.

This commandment reveals God's wisdom and care for His people. He knows that sexual sin destroys individuals, damages families, and undermines the fabric of society. He knows that departure from His design leads to misery and bondage. His commandment is not an arbitrary restriction but loving protection.

Throughout history, violations of this commandment have brought devastating results. From David's adultery with Bathsheba to the sexual immorality that characterized pagan cultures, the consequences of sexual sin are evident. Our own age, which has largely rejected biblical sexual ethics, demonstrates the same destructive patterns. Broken families, damaged children, widespread disease, and emotional trauma testify to the wisdom of God's ways.

The Seventh Commandment is not merely prohibitive. It also points us to the beauty of God's design for marriage. When lived according to God's plan, marriage brings joy, companionship, and fulfillment. It provides a stable environment for raising children. It pictures the relationship between Christ and the Church. It testifies to God's goodness and faithfulness.

For those who have violated this commandment, whether in act or in thought, the gospel offers hope. Jesus Christ kept every commandment perfectly on behalf of His people. He bore the punishment for sexual sin on the cross. He offers forgiveness to all who repent and believe. He gives power to overcome temptation and live in purity. No sin is too great for His grace to cover. No failure is beyond His power to redeem.

The church must continue to proclaim both the law and the gospel. We must teach God's standards for sexual conduct without compromise or apology. We must also extend the hope of forgiveness and transformation to those who have fallen short. We must support marriages, protect purity, and help those who struggle. We must be a community where holiness is pursued, and love and grace are abundant.

May God grant us wisdom to understand His design for marriage and sexuality. May He give us strength to resist temptation and pursue purity. May He enable us to honor marriage as He has ordained it. And may we find our ultimate satisfaction not in earthly pleasures but in knowing and serving the One who created us for Himself. To Him be glory both now and forever.

"Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble" (Psalm 119:165).

The Eighth Commandment

Exodus 20:15

Study

This chapter examines the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15), exploring its theological foundations, practical applications, and continuing relevance for contemporary Christian life. The commandment presupposes the legitimacy of private property, a principle rooted in creation itself and affirmed throughout both Testaments. The study demonstrates that theft encompasses far more than outright stealing, including dishonest labor practices, business deception, unpaid debts, and even the misappropriation of reputation and time.

At the heart of theft lies covetousness, a failure to trust in God's provision that our consumer culture actively cultivates. However, the commandment is not just prohibitive. It also calls believers to positive duties, including honest labor, contentment in God's providential provision, and generous sharing with those in need. Drawing on texts such as Ephesians 4:28, the study shows how the gospel transforms thieves into generous workers who labor not merely for personal gain but to help those in need. We conclude with practical applications for believers, emphasizing the stewardship principle that all we have ultimately belongs to God, and challenging readers to learn contentment, integrity in all dealings, and to use their resources to serve their neighbors in need and advance God's kingdom.

The Foundation of Property Rights

The commandment "You shall not steal" presupposes the legitimacy of private property. If there were no such thing as rightful ownership, there could be no such thing as theft. As R.C. Sproul observed in his study on the Eighth Commandment, "This commandment is irrelevant unless the Lord has established a right to private property. I can steal from someone else only if that someone has belongings that are rightfully his. If everything is owned in common, I am not stealing from you when I take something that you claim as your own because I am simply

claiming my share of what we own in common. Consequently, the eighth commandment assumes that human beings can lawfully own things that belong specifically to them."[54]

By forbidding theft, God affirms that individuals have a right to own property and that this right must be respected by others. This principle is found throughout Scripture and forms the foundation of a just and orderly society.

The right to private property is rooted in creation itself. When God created Adam and Eve, He gave them dominion over the earth and its resources.[55] They were to work the garden, cultivate it, and enjoy its fruits. This work and the fruit of that work belonged to them by God's design. When sin entered the world, it corrupted humanity's relationship with property, leading to greed, envy, and theft. Yet the principle of ownership remained, and God's law continued to protect it.

Throughout the Old Testament, we see God's concern for the protection of property. The law made provision for restitution when property was stolen or damaged. Exodus 22:1 states, "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep." This principle of restitution served both to compensate the victim and to deter theft. The penalty was not merely symbolic but designed to restore what was lost and to punish the wrongdoer appropriately.

The New Testament also affirms the right to private property. When Ananias and Sapphira sold their property, the apostle Peter made it clear that the property was theirs to keep or to give as they chose (Acts 5:4). The sin was not in keeping the property but in lying about what they had given. The early church's practice of sharing possessions was voluntary, not mandatory, demonstrating that private ownership remained a legitimate and protected right even among believers.

Private property is essential for human flourishing. It allows individuals to provide for themselves and their families, to plan for the future, and to use their resources in ways that honor God. It also provides the means for generosity and charity. We cannot give what we do not own.

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[54] R. C. Sproul, "The Eighth Commandment," Ligonier Ministries, accessed on 2/17/2026, https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/the-eighth-commandment.
[55] Genesis 1:28.

The Bible commends those who work hard, save wisely, and use their resources to help others. All of this depends on the recognition that individuals have a right to own and control property.

What Constitutes Theft?

Theft is not limited to breaking into someone's home or picking someone's pocket. It includes any act by which we take what belongs to another person without their consent. This can occur in many ways, some of which are socially acceptable or even legal but remain morally wrong in God's sight. The Heidelberg Catechism wisely observes that God forbids "not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law," but also includes "all scheming and swindling in order to get our neighbor's goods for ourselves, whether by force or means that appear legitimate."[56]

One common form of theft is failing to give an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. An employee who wastes time, neglects duties, or uses company resources for personal benefit is stealing from the employer. Similarly, an employer who withholds wages, demands excessive hours without fair compensation, or exploits workers is guilty of theft. James 5:4 pronounces judgment on such employers: "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."

Dishonesty in business is another form of theft. Proverbs 11:1 states, "A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight." In ancient times, merchants would sometimes use dishonest weights and measures to cheat their customers. Today, this might take the form of false advertising, misrepresenting a product's quality, or charging inflated prices for inferior goods. Any deception that results in financial gain at another's expense is theft.

Failure to repay debts also violates this commandment. Psalm 37:21 says, "The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives." When we borrow money or goods, we enter into an agreement to return them. To fail to do so, whether through neglect or deliberate refusal, is to take what does not belong to us. While circumstances may sometimes make repayment difficult, the righteous person will make every effort to fulfill their obligations.

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[56] *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 110, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 73.

Shoplifting, fraud, embezzlement, and burglary are obvious forms of theft, but there are subtler violations as well. Failing to return something we have borrowed, keeping money that was given to us by mistake, or taking advantage of someone's ignorance or vulnerability all constitute theft. Even accepting government assistance for which we do not qualify, or evading taxes we rightfully owe, can be forms of theft.

The principle extends beyond material possessions. We can steal someone's reputation through slander or gossip. We can steal someone's time by wasting it unnecessarily. We can steal credit for work that someone else has done. In all these ways and more, we violate the spirit of the Eighth Commandment.

The Root of Theft: Covetousness

At the heart of theft is covetousness, the desire for what belongs to someone else. The Tenth Commandment, "You shall not covet," addresses the internal sin that often leads to the external act of stealing. Before a person steals, they typically desire what another person has. John Calvin wisely observed that under the prohibition of theft, God "comprehends all kinds of wicked acts of defrauding and circumventing by which we hunt after" our neighbor's goods, for "the murder which the soul commits is wrath and hatred; the theft, covetousness and avarice."[57] We should note how the commandments overlap. For example, coveting leads to stealing.

Covetousness is closely related to discontent. When we are not satisfied with what God has provided, we begin to look at what others have and wish it were ours. This is a failure to trust in God's goodness and provision. Hebrews 13:5 instructs, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Contentment is the solution to covetousness. When we trust that God will provide for our needs and are grateful for what we have, we are far less likely to be tempted to take what belongs to another.

Our consumer-based culture breeds covetousness at every turn. Advertising is designed to create dissatisfaction with what we have and to convince us that we need the latest product, the newest model, or the upgraded version. In so many ads, contentment is redefined as possession: peace

[57] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.39–40, 45.

and satisfaction appear only once the product is acquired, implying that contentment is always just one more purchase away. For instance, I recently saw an advertisement from the watchmaker Rolex. The ad shows a scuba diver hesitating before diving. He is quite nervous, as he has never dived as deep as he is about to. After his dive, he is seen triumphantly smiling as he conquers his fear of deep water. Along with his big smile, we see a shiny new Rolex watch gleaming on his wrist. It appears that this is just what is needed to go from ordinary anxiety to elite mastery. The lesson is obvious! This ad teaches that buying a Rolex produces fulfillment. His dreams have come true! Or so the ad would have you believe.

Another way our culture produces discontent is through the internet and social media. It allows us to constantly compare our lives with others', often leading to envy and discontent. Many see others' homes, cars, vacations, and lifestyles, and begin to believe we deserve the same, even if we have not earned them or cannot afford them. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians speaks with equal force in our own consumer age. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, he reminds us. "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Make no mistake, Satan, the enemy of our souls, works tirelessly to make the things of this world attractive to all of us!

True contentment flows from finding our deepest joy in God himself. Truly, the person who has found this has found the greatest treasure of all. The prayer in the Book of Proverbs by Agur is one of the clearest expressions of contentment in all of wisdom literature, indeed of the Word of God. Writing in Proverbs 30:8-9, he says, "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." Another wonderful example is Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." This is one of the most beloved contentment verses in all of Scripture. This is finding great satisfaction in God's sufficiency as the Good Shepherd.[58]

The person who is discontented often has a mindset that can lead to financial irresponsibility, as individuals incur debt to acquire items they do not need. It can also lead to outright theft when people feel entitled to what others have worked to obtain. The solution is not to ignore others' prosperity but to fix our eyes on Christ and find our satisfaction in Him. Philippians 4:11-12

[58] John 10:14

records Paul's testimony: "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." Paul's contentment was not based on his circumstances but on his relationship with Christ.

The Positive Duty: Honest Labor and Generosity

The Eighth Commandment is not merely a prohibition against theft but also a call to honest labor and generosity. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 4:28, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." This verse contains three important principles: cease from stealing, engage in honest work, and be generous toward others.

Those who have stolen must stop. Repentance involves a complete turning away from sin. It is not enough to feel sorry for past wrongs or to promise to do better in the future. True repentance means ceasing the sinful behavior and making restitution where possible. Zacchaeus, the tax collector who encountered Jesus, demonstrated this kind of repentance. He declared, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). His repentance was genuine because it led to concrete action.

We are also called to engage in honest work. God designed human beings to work, and labor is a gift from Him. In fact, labor is considered an ordinance of creation.[59] Even before the fall, Adam was given the task of working and keeping the garden (Genesis 2:15). Work gives us purpose, provides for our needs, and allows us to contribute to society. Idleness and laziness are condemned in Scripture. Proverbs 6:6,11 warns, "Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise... poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man."

Honest work means more than simply being employed. It means working diligently, producing quality results, and treating employers, employees, and customers with integrity. Colossians 3:23 instructs, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." When we view our

[59] Creation ordinances are God's rules and practices set up at the world's beginning, woven into human life and society before the sin of Adam and Eve. They are not laws or ordinances that were meant to end in due time. The Creator established them for the benefit of mankind. These ordinances are marriage and procreation, dominion and stewardship, labor, and the Sabbath. Some theologians also include the sanctity of human life.

work as service to Christ, it transforms our attitude and our performance. We are no longer working merely to earn a paycheck but to glorify God. Whether we are well-paid professionals or flipping burgers at Burger King, we are called to work as well as we can and in a manner that honors the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are to be generous toward those in need. The purpose of honest labor is not merely to accumulate wealth for ourselves but to have resources to share with others. This reflects the character of God, who is the ultimate giver. Second Corinthians 9:6-7 teaches, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." As God has blessed us so abundantly, we should be a blessing to others and give to the work of the kingdom of God.

Generosity is not limited to giving money. We can be generous with our time, our skills, and our resources. We can help a neighbor in need, support a struggling family, or contribute to the work of the church. The early church in Acts provides a wonderful example of generosity: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35). While this level of communal sharing is not required of all believers, the principle of generosity should be a part of every Christian's life.

Application for Today

How then should we live in light of the Eighth Commandment? First, we must examine our own hearts and lives to see if we have violated this commandment in thought or deed. Have we taken what does not belong to us? Have we been dishonest in our business dealings? Have we failed to give our employer a full day's work? With the advent of technical capabilities for remote work, many now work from home. While this is a great benefit, it also requires caution and care to ensure that an employer receives a proper full day’s work. Have we neglected to repay debts? This is so common today, with many people racking up credit card debt and taking out ill-advised loans, only to find later that they cannot make payments.

We also must guard against covetousness by cultivating contentment. This begins with gratitude for what God has already given us. First Timothy 6:6,8 reminds us, "Godliness with contentment

is great gain... if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." We must also resist the constant pressure of advertising and social comparison that seeks to make us dissatisfied with our lives.

Additionally, we must commit ourselves to honest labor. Whatever our vocation, we should approach our work with diligence, integrity, and a desire to serve Christ. We should be known as people who can be trusted, who keep their word, and who deal fairly with others. This kind of reputation is more valuable than riches. Proverbs 22:1 says, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold."

Finally, we must remember that all we have ultimately belongs to God. We are stewards, not owners, of the resources He has entrusted to us. Psalm 24:1 declares, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." If we truly believe and understand this truth, it changes how we view property, work, and wealth. We no longer cling to our possessions but hold them with an open hand, ready to use them for God's glory and the good of others.

Conclusion

The Eighth Commandment calls us to respect others' property, work honestly, and be generous with what God has given us. It exposes the sin of covetousness and calls us to contentment in Christ. In a world marked by greed, dishonesty, and theft, God's people are to stand out as examples of integrity and generosity. This in itself is a wonderful witness to the grace of God in our lives. May we honor this commandment not merely by avoiding theft, but by actively pursuing righteousness in all our dealings, trusting that God will provide for our needs and that we will use our resources to bless others and advance His kingdom.

“I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight” (Psalm 119:174).

The Ninth Commandment

Exodus 20:16

Study

This chapter examines the Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16), exploring its theological foundations, its broader implications for truthfulness in all of life, and its enduring relevance for the people of God. The commandment was first given in the context of Israel's legal system, where a lying witness could send an innocent man to his death or allow a guilty man to walk free. That alone should tell us how seriously God regards the truth. But as we follow this commandment through the whole of Scripture, we see that its reach extends far beyond the courtroom. It touches every conversation, every relationship, and every setting in which we open our mouths. Slander, gossip, flattery, and deception in any form all fall under the ninth commandment’s far-reaching prohibition.

Our study examines the biblical foundation of truthfulness, grounded in the character of God Himself, who is identified throughout Scripture as the God of truth, and in whose image His people are called to reflect that truthfulness in their speech. Our study demonstrates that the Ninth Commandment requires not only that we reject falsehood but that we actively pursue and defend the truth. It teaches us that we should speak well of our neighbor’s good name and guard the reputation of others as carefully as we would guard our own. Our review of the commandment concludes with practical applications for believers living in a culture that is increasingly indifferent to or opposed to truth, calling us to be people whose speech is characterized by honesty, integrity, and love.

Introduction

The Ninth Commandment addresses one of the most common and destructive sins known to humanity: the misuse of speech. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16) is a command that strikes at the very heart of human relationships, for trust between people depends upon truthful communication. When truth is abandoned, relationships crumble, justice is perverted, and society itself begins to unravel. It is no accident that Scripture has so much to say about the tongue and its power, for as James reminds us, “The tongue is a

small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!" (James 3:5). With his characteristic sharpness, Thomas Watson wrote, "God has set two natural fences to keep in the tongue, the teeth and lips; and this commandment is a third fence set about it, that it should not break forth into evil."[60]

In the original setting of this commandment, the concern was the integrity of Israel's legal system. In ancient Israel, as in most societies then and now, the administration of justice depended upon the truthfulness of witnesses. A false witness could send an innocent person to death or allow a guilty person to escape punishment. The seriousness of this is reflected in Deuteronomy 19:18-19, which prescribes that a false witness must receive the punishment that would have been inflicted upon the accused: "If the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother." This principle of proportional justice teaches us how seriously God regards the corruption of truth in matters of judgment.

Yet the commandment reaches well beyond the courtroom. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes, the Ninth Commandment "requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbor's good name, especially in witness-bearing."[61] The scope of this commandment, therefore, encompasses all of our speech, demanding that we use our words to build up rather than tear down, to honor God's truth rather than serve our own selfish interests.

The God of Truth

The foundation of the Ninth Commandment rests upon the character of God Himself. God is truth. We need to understand that this is not one attribute among many, but a defining characteristic of His very being. Jesus declared, "I am the way, and the ***truth***, and the life" (John 14:6). The Holy Spirit is called "the ***Spirit of truth***" (John 16:13). The psalmist proclaims, "The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever" (Psalm

[60] Watson, *Ten Commandments*, 169.
[61] *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1981), Q. 77.

119:160). Because God is truth, He cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), and every word that proceeds from His mouth is completely trustworthy.

Since we are created in the image of God, we are called to reflect His truthfulness in our own speech and conduct. When we lie, it is not just a violation of a moral rule. We do damage to the image of God within us and align ourselves with the devil, whom Jesus identified as "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). There is a spiritual dimension to every act of deception. Lying is ultimately satanic in origin, for it was through the serpent's lie in the Garden that sin and death entered the world. "Did God actually say?" (Genesis 3:1) was the first recorded instance of bearing false witness, and its consequences have been seen in every generation since.

Watson observed that "Lying is a sin that doth not go alone; it is accompanied with many other sins. It is accompanied by atheism; one who tells lies does, in effect, deny that there is a God of truth."[62] This is a sobering reminder that dishonesty is not a trivial matter. It strikes at the very foundation of our relationship with God. Those who practice falsehood place themselves in opposition to the One who has revealed Himself as the God who keeps His promises and whose holy Word never fails.

The Meaning of the Commandment

The Hebrew text of the Ninth Commandment uses the phrase *lo' taʿaneh bereʿakha ʿed sheqer*, which translates literally as "You shall not answer against your neighbor as a witness[63] of falsehood."[64] The word "answer" (ʿaneh) indicates formal testimony, the kind given in a court of law when one is called upon to give an account. The word for "witness" (ʿed) is the standard term for one who testifies in legal proceedings. And the word "falsehood" (sheqer) denotes deliberate deception, not merely a mistake or misunderstanding, but willful dishonesty.

In Israel's legal system, the testimony of witnesses was essential to the administration of justice. Deuteronomy 17:6 required that "on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one

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[62]Watson, *Ten Commandments*, 170.

[63]The Hebrew word *ʿed* (עד) means "witness" and carries the sense of one who testifies or bears testimony regarding what he has seen, heard, or knows. The related word *ʿedut* (עדות) is the term used for the "testimony" inscribed on the tablets of the law, underscoring the covenantal significance of truthful witness.

[64]The Hebrew *sheqer* (שֶׁקֶר) denotes falsehood, deception, or that which is vain and empty. It describes speech or testimony that is deliberately contrary to the truth, not merely mistaken but willfully deceitful.

who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness." The requirement of multiple witnesses served as a safeguard against false accusations, but it also placed enormous responsibility on those who testified. To bear false witness was to participate in a perversion of justice and potentially to condemn the innocent to death.

The story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 provides a vivid illustration of the deadly consequences of false witness. When King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, Queen Jezebel came up with a scheme in which two false witnesses accused Naboth of blasphemy and treason. On the basis of their lying testimony, Naboth was stoned to death, and Ahab seized his property. This event demonstrates how false witness can serve as a weapon of injustice, enabling the powerful to oppress the innocent. God's response was swift and severe. Through the prophet Elijah, He pronounced judgment upon both Ahab and Jezebel, declaring, "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood" (1 Kings 21:19).

There is no doubt that the trial of Jesus provides the supreme example of false witness in Scripture. Spurgeon once observed, "God had a Son that had no fault, but He never had a son that was not found fault with. God Himself was slandered in paradise by Satan."[65] Mark 14:55-56 records, "Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree." The Son of God, who is Himself the Truth, was condemned to death on the basis of manufactured testimony. The irony is very profound. The One who perfectly embodied absolute truth was destroyed by falsehood, yet through His death and resurrection, He secured the ultimate triumph of truth over every lie!

The Broader Scope: All Forms of Falsehood

While the Ninth Commandment has immediate implications for the judicial system, its application extends to every sphere of human communication. The Scriptures consistently condemn all forms of dishonesty, deception, and verbal abuse. Proverbs 6:16,19 lists among the things the Lord hates "a lying tongue" and "a false witness who breathes out lies." Colossians 3:9 instructs believers, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with

[65] C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, complete and unabridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), chap. 22, "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear."

its practices." Ephesians 4:25 calls upon believers to "put away falsehood" and to "speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."

Slander is one of the most destructive forms of false witness. It involves deliberately making false and damaging statements about another person with the intent of destroying their reputation. The Hebrew word *rakhil* (רָכִיל), used in Leviticus 19:16, refers to one who goes about as a talebearer or slanderer: "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people." Slander is particularly evil because its damage is often irreparable. Once a person's reputation has been destroyed by false or malicious speech, it is very difficult to restore.

J.C. Ryle wisely cautioned that "there is no sin that men so frequently commit as the sin of the tongue. Lying, slandering, backbiting, tale-bearing, flattering, and jesting are of daily occurrence."[66] When we were children, many of us heard, and perhaps said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." This classic English-language children's rhyme was commonly used to dismiss verbal insults, often in response to bullying. The truth, however, is that words can and often do hurt people. Being lied about or slandered can significantly harm a person. Sometimes, emotional trauma from slander can far outweigh a physical injury! Proverbs 20:19 provides us with wisdom in these matters: "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with a simple babbler."[67]

Gossip is equally condemned in the Word of God. Gossip involves sharing information about others, whether true or false, in a way that is careless, unnecessary, or motivated by a desire to make oneself look better than someone else. Proverbs 16:28 warns, "A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends." Proverbs 26:20 teaches, "For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases." The gossip may reveal that what they share is true, but the Ninth Commandment is not only about factual accuracy. It is about using our speech in a way that honors God and serves the good of our neighbor.

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[66]J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew* (1856; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1986), 37.
[67]The Hebrew word translated 'babbler' (פֶּתִי, peti) carries the sense of one who is easily led into loose or careless talk, someone who cannot be trusted to guard the confidences of others. The broader context of the verse links this careless speech with slander, warning believers to avoid those whose tongues cause harm. The word is used 19 times in the Book of Proverbs.

Flattery is another subtle form of dishonesty condemned in Scripture. Flattery is insincere praise offered not for the benefit of the recipient but for the advantage of the one speaking. Proverbs 29:5 warns, “A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.” Unlike genuine encouragement, which builds others up in truth, flattery is just deception. It tells people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear, and more often than not, it conceals selfish motives behind a disguise of kindness. As John Piper has noted, "Flattery is bad because it's calculated. It is given with a view to obtaining some advantage.”[68]

Half-truths and deliberate omissions are also violations of the Ninth Commandment. When we present partial information in a way designed to create a false impression, we are bearing false witness even though every word we speak may be technically accurate. The Westminster Larger Catechism recognizes this, listing among the sins that violate the Ninth Commandment “speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful or equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice.”[69] This is a high standard that challenges all of us to examine not only the content of our speech but also the manner and the motive behind it.

The Damage of False Witness

The consequences of bearing false witness are far-reaching and devastating. Being a false witness destroys trust. Human relationships are built upon the assumption that people mean what they say. When that assumption is broken by dishonesty, the results can be tragic. A spouse who discovers that their partner has been lying loses the foundation of trust upon which the marriage was built. A friend who learns that they have been the subject of gossip finds it difficult to maintain the friendship. A congregation that discovers its leaders have been deceptive loses confidence in their spiritual guidance. When trust is broken, it can be very difficult to restore.

Also, a false witness perverts justice. When witnesses lie in court, innocent people may be convicted, and guilty people may go free. When public figures running for office spread misinformation or outright lies, people are misled and democratic processes are compromised.

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[68] John Piper, "How Do I Praise Others but Avoid Flattery?" Desiring God, accessed February 18, 2026, https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-i-praise-others-but-avoid-flattery.
[69] Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 145 (1648).

When store owners deceive their customers, honest purchasing is undermined. The prophet Isaiah pronounced a woe upon "those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isaiah 5:20). Wherever truth is abandoned, injustice advances.

Additionally, false witness damages the reputation and well-being of others. Proverbs 25:18 declares, "A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow." This imagery conveys the violent nature of dishonest speech. Words can wound as deeply as weapons. They can destroy careers, break up families, and drive people to despair. The psalmist cried out against those who "whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows" (Psalm 64:3). The pain inflicted by false or malicious words is not imaginary. It is real and often lasting.

Lastly, false witness offends God. Because God is truth, every lie is an affront to His character. Proverbs 12:22 states this very plainly, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight." The book of Revelation reveals the ultimate seriousness of falsehood by declaring that "all liars" will have their portion in the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). This is not because lying is worse than every other sin, but because persistent, unrepentant dishonesty reveals a heart that does not know God and has not been awakened by the truth of the gospel. Those who belong to the God of truth will increasingly reflect His truthfulness in their own lives.

Truth in the Age of Deception

We live in an age that has a deeply troubled relationship with truth. The rise of social media has created an environment in which misinformation spreads in nanoseconds.[70] News outlets are often perceived as biased, and public trust in various institutions has eroded significantly. The concept of "post-truth" has entered the cultural vocabulary, describing a condition in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. In such an environment, the Ninth Commandment speaks with urgent relevance.

The digital age that we live in has brought new ways to bear false witness. Online anonymity makes people bold. They cast accusations and spread rumors without fearing any consequences.

[70] A nanosecond is one billionth of a second. Nanoseconds measure speeds in computing, like RAM, access times, or processor cycles.

Social media lets lies spread like wildfire before anyone can set the record straight. And now, AI tools can create fake images or recordings that look totally real. Reputations can be trashed online in a flash, often based on nothing more than unverified claims. We can say that this is a modern twist on bearing false witness. The Old and New Testament writers could never have imagined the modern age, yet their timeless principles and understanding of the sinful heart remain as penetrating and relevant as ever.

Christians are not immune to these temptations. It is alarmingly easy to share an article without verifying its accuracy, to repeat a rumor without confirming its truth, or to make assumptions about others based on incomplete information. The speed of digital communication often outpaces our capacity for careful thought and discernment. Yet the Ninth Commandment calls us to a greater standard. Before we speak or type, we must ask ourselves whether what we are about to communicate is true, necessary, and serves the good of our neighbor. If the answer to any of these questions is no, we should remain silent.

The Positive Duty: Speaking Truth in Love

As with all the commandments, the Ninth Commandment has both a negative and a positive dimension. It forbids falsehood, but it also requires truthfulness. Ephesians 4:15 calls believers to speak "the truth in love," a passage that captures both the content and the manner of our speech. Truth without love can be harsh and destructive. Love without truth can be sentimental and misleading. The Christian is called to speak honestly and lovingly in every situation.

This positive duty includes defending our neighbor's good name. When someone is unjustly accused or when rumors circulate about a fellow believer, we have an obligation to speak up in their defense. Proverbs 31:8-9 instructs, "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy." Standing for truth sometimes requires courage, especially when the tide of popular opinion runs against it. Yet the Christian is called to bear witness to what is right, even when doing so is costly.

This duty also includes truthful and honest self-examination. The Ninth Commandment not only governs what we say about others but also what we say about ourselves. Exaggeration, self-promotion, and the selective presentation of facts to make ourselves look better than we are all

fall under the prohibition of this command. The apostle Paul modeled a different approach when he wrote to the Corinthians, “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2). Honesty, humility, and sincerity are hallmarks of a life guided by the Ninth Commandment.

Application for the Church Today

How then should we live in light of the Ninth Commandment? One aspect of great importance is that we must commit ourselves to truthfulness in all our dealings. This means telling the truth even when it is inconvenient, even when it makes us look bad, and even when others may prefer to hear something different. It means refusing to participate in gossip, slander, or the spreading of unverified information. It means being honest in our business transactions, personal relationships, and public discourse.

Another aspect of being guided by this commandment is that we must guard other people’s reputations. This requires us to think carefully before we speak, to give others the benefit of the doubt, and to refuse to pass along information that may be harmful or unverified. When we hear something negative about a fellow believer, our first instinct should not be to share it with someone else but to go directly to the person involved, following the pattern laid down by Christ in Matthew 18:15: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” This approach protects the dignity of the individual and preserves the unity of the body of Christ.

Sadly, it is possible to tell the truth in a way that is mean-spirited, self-serving, or needlessly hurtful. The Ninth Commandment calls us to a higher standard, one in which our words are governed not only by truth but by love, humility, and a genuine concern for the well-being of others. Ephesians 4:29 provides a searching standard: “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Lastly, we must recognize our own susceptibility to self-deception. Jeremiah 17:9 warns, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” We are often the last to recognize our own dishonesty, whether it takes the form of rationalizing our behavior,

minimizing our sins, or constructing a false image of ourselves for others to see. The remedy for self-deception is the Word of God, which Hebrews 4:12 describes as "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Regular, prayerful engagement with Scripture exposes the deceptions of our own hearts and conforms us increasingly to the truth.

Conclusion

The Ninth Commandment calls the people of God to be people of truth. In a world full of deception, lies, half-truths, and misinformation, the Church is called to stand as a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). We are to put away all falsehood and speak the truth with our neighbor, knowing that we are members of one another. We are to guard the reputation of others, defend the innocent, and refuse to participate in the destruction of another's good name. We are to examine our own hearts for dishonesty and submit ourselves continually to the refining work of God's Word and Spirit.

Ultimately, the Ninth Commandment points us to Christ, who is the Truth incarnate. At His trial, He stood silent as false witnesses condemned Him, bearing in His own body the penalty for our sins, including the lies and deceptions we have spoken against God and one another. In Jesus, we find both the standard of perfect honesty and the grace to grow more like Him.

"Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart" (Psalm 119:34).

The Tenth Commandment

Exodus 20:17

Study

This chapter examines the Tenth Commandment, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17). Unlike the preceding commandments, which address outward actions such as murder, adultery, theft, and false witness, the Tenth Commandment addresses the inner life of the soul. It exposes the sinful desires and longings that give rise to every external transgression. Covetousness is the root from which all other sins against our neighbor grow, and by prohibiting it, God reveals that His law governs not only what we do but also what we desire. This study traces a biblical theology of covetousness, examines its manifestations in Scripture and in the life of the believer, and demonstrates that the remedy for covetousness is found in contentment rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

The Tenth Commandment stands as the finale of the Decalogue, ending in God's demand that reaches beyond outward behavior to the deepest desires of the heart. While the first commandment declares, 'You shall have no other gods before me,' the tenth forbids those inward, idolatrous longings that would set created things in the place of the Creator. Together they form a kind of boundary around the whole moral law, reminding us that true obedience to God must begin and end in the heart.

Exodus 20:17 reads, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” The Hebrew verb *chamad* (חָמַד), translated “covet,” means to desire, to

long for, or to take pleasure in something.[71] The word itself is not inherently sinful, for it is used in Psalm 19:10 to describe how God's ordinances are "more to be desired than gold," and in Genesis 2:9 to describe the trees God made as "pleasant to the sight." What makes desire sinful is when it is directed at what belongs to another, when it becomes an inordinate longing that displaces trust in God and threatens the well-being of one's neighbor. The commandment addresses not merely a fleeting thought but a disposition of the heart, a craving that, if not addressed, becomes the origin of transgression. This commandment reveals the true condition of the heart, whether we are content to rest in God's wise providence or whether we are inwardly resisting against what He has appointed for us.

What sets this commandment apart is not that the others are merely outward, for the whole law of God speaks to the heart. Rather, the Tenth Commandment makes desire itself the explicit target, addressing the inward longing before it ever becomes an outward act. The Sixth through Ninth Commandments address specific outward acts, murder, adultery, theft, and false witness, but the Tenth goes deeper still, targeting the desires that precede and produce those acts. James 1:14-15 describes this progression: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

We could say that covetousness is the spark that ignites the flame of outward sin. David's adultery with Bathsheba began with a covetous look (2 Samuel 11:2). Achan's theft of the devoted things at Jericho began when he "saw" and "coveted" them (Joshua 7:21). Ahab's murder of Naboth grew from his coveting of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). In each case, the outward transgression was the result of an inward desire that had been allowed to take root and grow.

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[71]The Hebrew verb *chamad* (חָמַד) carries the sense of desiring or taking delight in something. It is used both positively (Psalm 19:10; Genesis 2:9) and negatively (Exodus 20:17; Joshua 7:21), indicating that the moral quality of the desire depends on its object and its ordering under God's will.

The Spirituality of the Law

The Tenth Commandment reveals what theologians have long called the "spirituality of the law," the truth that God's moral demands extend beyond external conduct to the thoughts, motives, and desires of the heart. This principle is not unique to the tenth commandment, for Christ Himself taught in the Sermon on the Mount that anger violates the sixth commandment (Matthew 5:21-22) and that lustful desire violates the seventh (Matthew 5:27-28). But the tenth commandment makes this principle explicit in the Decalogue itself. By placing a prohibition against desire alongside prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, and perjury, God reveals that the inner life is as subject to His law as the outer life.

The Apostle Paul understood the devastating power of this commandment. In Romans 7:7-8, he writes, "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness." For Paul, the tenth commandment was the commandment that exposed the depth of his sinfulness. He may well have kept the external requirements of the law with great diligence, but when confronted with the prohibition against coveting, he realized that sin had infected his very desires. The law, as Paul says elsewhere, became his "tutor" or "guardian" to lead him to Christ (Galatians 3:24), for only in Christ could the sinful desires of the heart be forgiven and progressively overcome.

John Calvin observed that the purpose of this commandment is to ensure "that every part of the soul be formed to love."[72] God is not content with outward compliance while the heart seethes with envy and selfish desire. He demands integrity of heart, a love for Him and for neighbor that governs not only what we do but what we want. Calvin further warned that "so deep and tortuous are the recesses in which the evils of covetousness lurk that they easily deceive man's sight," and that "if by the law covetousness is not dragged from its lair, it destroys wretched man so secretly that he does not even feel its fatal stab."[73] The tenth commandment, then, serves as a mirror that

[72]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.49.
[73]Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.49.

exposes what no human court and no outward observation could ever detect: the sinful cravings of the human heart.

The Many Faces of Covetousness

The commandment specifies several objects that must not be coveted: a neighbor's house, wife, servants, animals, and "anything that is your neighbor's." This comprehensive list demonstrates that covetousness can attach itself to any blessing God has given to another person. It may take the form of desiring another's possessions, another's relationships, another's position, another's gifts, or another's success. The scope of the prohibition is as wide as human desire itself.

Scripture provides vivid examples of the destructive power of covetousness in all its forms. The coveting of material wealth led Gehazi, Elisha's servant, to pursue Naaman the Syrian with a lie to obtain silver and garments (2 Kings 5:20–27). The coveting of power and position led Absalom to steal the hearts of Israel and attempt to overthrow his own father, King David (2 Samuel 15). The coveting of another's spouse led David himself to commit adultery with Bathsheba and arrange the death of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11). And the coveting of forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was the very first sin, as Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). In every case, the pattern is the same: desire leads to decision, and decision leads to sin.

Covetousness is closely related to envy, which is grief or resentment at the good fortune of another. While covetousness says, "I want what you have," envy goes further and says, "I resent that you have it at all." Envy poisoned the hearts of Joseph's brothers and led them to sell him into slavery (Genesis 37:11). Envy motivated Saul's relentless pursuit of David (1 Samuel 18:8-9). And envy was the reason the chief priests delivered Jesus to Pilate (Mark 15:10). The Apostle Paul includes both covetousness and envy in his catalogs of sin (Romans 1:29; Galatians 5:21), and the book of Proverbs warns that "a tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot" (Proverbs 14:30). Covetousness and envy together form a combination that corrodes the soul and destroys relationships.

Covetousness as Idolatry

Perhaps the most striking statement about covetousness in all of Scripture is found in Colossians 3:5, where the Apostle Paul writes, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Paul does not say that covetousness is merely like idolatry or that it leads to idolatry. He declares that covetousness is idolatry. This identification reveals the ultimate nature of the sin. When we covet, we are placing created things in the position that belongs to God alone. We are saying, in effect, that God is not enough, that what He has provided is insufficient, and that our happiness depends on obtaining what He has chosen to give to someone else.

This connection between the tenth commandment and the first is no accident. The Decalogue begins with the command to worship God alone and ends with the prohibition of the desire that would dethrone Him. Thomas Watson, the Puritan divine, captured this connection well when he observed that covetousness is "a dry drunkenness" in which the soul is intoxicated not with wine but with the love of the world.[74] The covetous person may never bow before a carved image, yet his heart worships the idol of his own desire. As the Lord Jesus warned, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24). Covetousness is the worship of mammon, and mammon is a jealous god that demands total allegiance.

The Apostle Paul also warns Timothy about the spiritual danger of the love of money, which is a particular expression of covetousness. In 1 Timothy 6:9-10 he writes, "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." The language is vivid and alarming: temptation, snare, ruin, destruction, wandering from the faith, self-inflicted pain. Covetousness does not merely disappoint; it destroys.

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[74] Watson, *The Ten Commandments*,170.

The Remedy: Contentment in Christ

If covetousness is the disease, contentment is the cure. And true contentment, as Scripture teaches, is not the product of favorable circumstances but the fruit of faith in a sovereign and gracious God. The writer of Hebrews exhorts, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5). The ground of contentment is not that we have everything we want but that we have God Himself, who has promised never to abandon His people.

The supreme example of contentment in the New Testament is the Apostle Paul. Writing from a Roman prison, Paul declares, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:11–13). Paul's contentment was not a natural temperament or a philosophical detachment from the world. It was a learned disposition, cultivated through years of suffering, deprivation, and dependence on Christ. The "secret" he discovered was that Christ Himself is sufficient for every circumstance, and that no earthly possession or deprivation can add to or diminish the riches the believer possesses in Him.

Paul further instructs Timothy about the nature of true gain: "Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content" (1 Timothy 6:6–8). The world measures gain in terms of accumulation, but Paul measures it in terms of godliness and satisfaction in God. The contented believer is the richest person in the world, for he possesses what no amount of money can buy and no thief can steal: the peace of God that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Contentment also flows from gratitude. When we recognize that every good gift comes from the hand of God (James 1:17), we are freed from the tyranny of comparison and the restless pursuit of more. The Psalmist models this disposition: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). To say "I shall not want" is not to say "I have no needs" but rather "I have a Shepherd who provides, and therefore I lack nothing essential." This is the heart of contentment: not the absence of desire but the satisfaction of the soul in the goodness and sufficiency of God.

Covetousness in the Modern World

Our consumer-driven culture fuels covetousness at every turn. Advertising is designed to create dissatisfaction with what we have and to convince us that we need the latest product, the newest model, or the upgraded version. Social media allows us to constantly compare our lives with others, often leading to envy and discontent. We see the homes, cars, vacations, and lifestyles of others and begin to think that we deserve the same, even if we have not worked for it or cannot afford it.

This mindset can lead to financial irresponsibility, as people go into debt to acquire things they do not need. It can also lead to outright theft when people feel entitled to what others have worked to obtain. The prosperity gospel, which promises material blessing as the birthright of every believer, is itself a baptized form of covetousness that distorts the teaching of Scripture and leads many astray. The Bible never promises that faithfulness to God will result in material wealth. Rather, it teaches that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15) and that the treasures of this world are temporary, fleeting, and ultimately unsatisfying compared to the eternal inheritance reserved in heaven for those who belong to Christ (1 Peter 1:4).

The solution is not to ignore others' prosperity but to fix our eyes on Christ and find our satisfaction in Him. As the writer of Hebrews urges, we are to run the race of faith "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). When our gaze is fixed on Christ, the glitter of the world grows dim, and the riches of the gospel become our supreme treasure.

Application for the Church Today

How then should the people of God guard against the sin of covetousness? Certainly, we must cultivate a habit of self-examination. Because covetousness is an internal sin, it is easily hidden from others and even from ourselves. We must regularly bring our hearts before the Lord and ask the Spirit to reveal any sinful desires lurking beneath the surface. The prayer of Psalm 139:23-24 is fitting: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Second, we must guard against covetousness by cultivating contentment. This begins with gratitude for what God has already given us. First Timothy 6:6,8 reminds us, "Godliness with contentment is great gain… if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." We must also resist the constant pressure of advertising and social comparison that seeks to make us dissatisfied with our lives. Believers ought to be the most grateful and contented people on earth, for we possess an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Peter 1:4).

Third, we must practice generosity. Generosity is the opposite of covetousness. Where covetousness grasps, generosity gives. Where covetousness hoards, generosity shares. The Apostle Paul instructs the wealthy "to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:18-19). Generosity breaks the power of covetousness by redirecting our resources outward toward the needs of others and the glory of God.

Fourth, we must fix our minds on eternal realities. Colossians 3:1-2 commands, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Covetousness thrives when our horizons are limited to this present world. When we lift our eyes to the glory that awaits us, the temporary pleasures and possessions of this life assume their proper, lesser place.

Conclusion

The Tenth Commandment brings the Decalogue to its fitting conclusion by exposing the root from which all sins against our neighbor grow. Covetousness is not a minor vice or a harmless wish. It is idolatry, for it exalts our desires in the place of God. It is the root of theft, adultery, murder, and every form of injustice. And it is a sin so deeply embedded in the fallen human heart that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can root it out and replace it with the contentment and generosity that God requires.

The good news is that Christ bore the penalty for our covetous hearts on the cross. He who was rich beyond our imagination and became poor for our sakes, that we through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). He did not covet equality with the Father as something to be

grasped but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6,7). In His perfect obedience, He fulfilled the tenth commandment on our behalf, offering the Father the pure and undivided heart we could never offer. By His Spirit, He now works within us to put to death the deeds of the flesh, including covetousness, and to produce the fruit of love, joy, peace, and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23).

May the Lord grant us hearts free from coveting and give us peace that comes from resting in His all-sufficient grace. May we learn, with the Apostle Paul, the secret of contentment in every circumstance. And may our lives reflect not the grasping spirit of the world but the generous, self-giving love of our Savior, who gave Himself for us and now calls us to find in Him our highest treasure and deepest satisfaction.

"I remember your name in the night, O LORD, and keep your law" (Psalm 119:55).

A Final Word

The Ten Commandments: Summary

We live in a world that has largely turned its back on the God who spoke from Mount Sinai. The moral foundations that once shaped homes, communities, and nations have been shaken and, in many places, abandoned altogether. Yet God's Word has not changed. His commandments remain as true, as powerful, and as loving as the day He first thundered them from that holy mountain. This book is a heartfelt invitation to rediscover the Ten Commandments, not as cold rules carved in stone, but as the gracious instruction of a Father who loves His children and longs for them to walk in the path of life.

The purpose of this book is clear from the very first page: the commandments were never meant to crush us under a burden of guilt, but to point us to Christ. Before God ever gave the Law at Sinai, He first rescued His people from slavery in Egypt. Grace came before the commandments. Redemption came before obedience. The God who saved Israel is the same God who saves sinners today through the finished work of Jesus Christ, and the commandments are His loving guide for those He has already set free.

The book opens with an introduction that lays the groundwork for everything that follows. It explores the awesome scene at Mount Sinai, where God descended in fire, smoke, and thunder to speak His Law directly to His people. No other portion of Scripture was delivered this way. The commandments were spoken by God's own voice and written by His own finger, underscoring their authority and permanence. The introduction also explains the three uses of the Law in the life of the believer: to restrain sin in society, to convict sinners of their need for a Savior, and to guide holy living for the Christian. As the Puritan Thomas Watson so beautifully put it, "Though the moral law be not a Christ to justify us, it is a rule to instruct us."

The First Commandment calls us to give God the supreme place in our hearts, reminding us that idolatry takes many subtle forms in our modern world, from the worship of money and success to the dangerous habit of creating a god in our own image rather than worshiping the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture. The Second Commandment addresses how we worship, warning against any attempt to represent God through images and calling us to worship in spirit

and in truth. The Third Commandment goes far beyond avoiding profanity, extending to broken promises, hypocrisy, and irreverent worship, calling us to hallow the name of the God we claim to love. The Fourth Commandment presents the Sabbath as a gift, not a burden, a day designed for our good, our worship, and our spiritual renewal, pointing us ultimately to the eternal rest we have in Christ.

The second table of the Law, beginning with the Fifth Commandment, turns our attention to how we treat one another. Honoring parents is presented as the foundation of all earthly authority, and the book does not shy away from addressing the heartbreaking crisis of fatherless homes in our nation. The Sixth Commandment reaches deep into the heart, as Jesus taught, condemning not only the physical act of murder but also the anger, bitterness, and hatred that are murder in seed form, while also addressing urgent contemporary issues such as abortion and euthanasia. The Seventh Commandment upholds God's beautiful design for marriage and sexual purity, calling believers to swim against the powerful currents of a culture that has abandoned biblical standards. The Eighth Commandment speaks to honest labor, generosity, and the stewardship of all that God has entrusted to us. The Ninth Commandment addresses the devastating power of the tongue, calling us to be people of truth in an age of deception, gossip, and slander. And the Tenth Commandment reaches into the deepest recesses of the human heart, exposing the covetous desires that are the root of so many outward sins and pointing us to the only remedy: contentment in Christ.

In reviewing each commandment, we have consistently brought it back to the gospel. At the end of every chapter, the reader is reminded that no one has perfectly kept these commandments except Jesus Christ. He alone loved God with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength. He alone loved His neighbor perfectly. And He did it all on behalf of His people. His perfect obedience is credited to every believer's account, and His death on the cross paid the full penalty for every commandment we have broken. This is the heart of the good news: we are not saved by our own law keeping, but by His. And having been saved by grace, we are now empowered by the Holy Spirit to grow in obedience, not to earn God's favor, but because we already have it through faith in Jesus Christ.

This book is written for all readers. For the mature believer, it will deepen your love for God's Law and sharpen your understanding of what it means to walk in holiness. For the young Christian, it will provide a solid foundation for understanding how the commandments apply to everyday life. For the person who has not yet come to faith in Christ, these pages will serve as a faithful mirror, showing you both the holiness of God and your desperate need for a Savior, and then pointing you to the One who stands ready to forgive and transform anyone who comes to Him in repentance and faith.

This book is written with the conviction that nothing short of a great spiritual awakening will heal the brokenness of our culture. The answer to what ails our homes, our communities, and our nation is not political strategy or human wisdom. It is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaimed faithfully and received humbly. These pages are offered as a faithful proclamation of that gospel, set within the framework of God's holy Law, offered with a deep love for the Church and for the lost.

May the Lord use this work to revive hearts, to awaken sinners, and to strengthen the Church for the glory of Jesus Christ, the only Savior of sinners, to whom be all honor, praise, and glory, both now and forevermore.

"I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11).

Epilogue

The Law and the Gospel

Something has gone profoundly wrong with how the Gospel is often proclaimed in our day. The Law of God was quietly removed from the evangelist's message, and in its place came an invitation stripped of any serious consideration of sin, with little mention of the holy character of the Creator, and a reduced Gospel that asked very little of the hearer and promised a great deal. The result, as any honest observer of the contemporary church must acknowledge, has been the filling of our churches with people who made a decision but were never truly converted, people who raised a hand or walked an aisle, but whose lives gave little evidence of the Holy Spirit's transforming power.

The late Walter Chantry addressed this crisis with great clarity and courage in his important work, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* Chantry argued that the modern church had abandoned the biblical pattern of evangelism in favor of a method that, at its core, was a different gospel altogether. The great missing element, he contended, was the Law of God. When the Law is removed from the proclamation of the Gospel, the result is an easy-believism that produces shallow roots, a profession without possession, and a form of godliness that lacks its power. Chantry's diagnosis, as painful as it was, was simply and faithfully biblical. And it remains every bit as urgent today as when he first wrote it.

The pages of this book have, in their own way, offered a sustained answer to that very crisis. We have walked through the Ten Commandments one by one, not as museum pieces from a forgotten age but as the living and enduring Word of the holy God who thundered them from Sinai and inscribed them with His own finger on tablets of stone. If the preceding chapters have accomplished anything, it is to show that God's Law has not been put out of business. It remains as holy as ever. It demands as much as ever. And it cuts as deeply into the human heart as it has always cut, because the God who gave it has not changed and the sinfulness of the human heart must still be addressed.

The Pattern of Christ

If we wish to know how to use the Law in evangelism, we need look no further than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. In the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, a young man ran to Jesus and fell on

his knees before Him, asking, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). On the surface, this was the ideal evangelistic opportunity. Here was a seeker, earnest enough to run and humble enough to kneel. What did Jesus do?

He did not immediately present the plan of salvation. He did not ask the man to repeat a prayer or invite him to accept a decision. Instead, He went straight to the commandments. "You know the commandments," Jesus said, and then He listed them, commandment by commandment. "Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother" (Mark 10:19). Jesus used the Law to prepare the soil of the young man's heart before sowing the seed of the Gospel.

When the young man replied that he had kept all these things from his youth, Jesus looked at him with great love and compassion, then reached past his external compliance straight into his heart. "You lack one thing," He said. "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). In that moment, the First Commandment did its job. The man's god was revealed. He worshipped his wealth more than he worshipped God, and ultimately left in great sorrow. The Law had done precisely what Scripture says it always does: it brought knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20). It closed the man's mouth. It exposed the heart he had managed to hide, even from himself.

This is the pattern of Christ's evangelism. If it was His pattern, shouldn’t it be ours? He did not bypass the Law to get to the Gospel. He used the Law to teach the necessity of the Gospel. He allowed the commandments to do their appointed work of conviction before He offered the word of grace. This is not a minor point of methodology. It goes to the very heart of what the Gospel is and why sinners need it.

The Law's Appointed Work

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Rome, was clear about the Law's role in bringing sinners to Christ. "Through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). And again, "The law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). The Law is, in Paul's vivid language, a tutor or guardian, not the end result but the means that leads the convicted sinner to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is why the removal of the Law in evangelism is so tragic. When a sinner is told that God loves him and has a wonderful plan for his life, without knowing anything about who God is or the depth of his own sin, he has no frame of reference for what he is being offered. Grace means nothing to a man who does not know he is condemned. Forgiveness is not precious to someone who does not feel the weight of his guilt. The cross is not good news to a person who has never understood the bad news. As Chantry so pointedly observed, a man who does not know he is lost has no real reason to be found.

The Law, by the awakening work of the Holy Spirit, prepares the heart for the Gospel, the way a plow prepares the ground for seed. Hard ground does not receive seed. A heart that has never been broken by the holy demands of God's Law is not ready for the Gospel. The conviction of sin, that deep and painful awareness of having fallen short of God's righteous standard, is not an obstacle to conversion. The man who comes to Christ knowing he is a sinner comes in a very different spirit than the man who comes because he has been told that God wants to be his friend.

Yet, and I want to be very clear, we must be careful not to place an over confidence in our witnessing method. The pattern of Law and Gospel is a faithful and time-honored approach to witnessing, but it is not a formula that produces new birth on demand. Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9). It has always been that way and will always be that way, for it is by grace alone that a person is saved. It is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit to open blind eyes, soften hard hearts, and awaken the dead sinner to his need of Christ. God has saved souls through stammering witnesses and poor presentations of the Gospel, and He has done so because the power lies not in the messenger but in the message, and ultimately in the God who stands behind it. We follow the pattern advocated because it is wise and biblical, but we trust the outcome to Him alone.

The Law and Revival

Church history bears this out with a consistency that should command our attention. Every great spiritual awakening in the history of the Western church has been accompanied by a powerful recovery of the Law's convicting work. When George Whitefield preached to the coal miners of Kingswood, England in the 1730s, the men wept until white channels ran down their coal-blackened faces before they rejoiced in the mercy of Christ. When Jonathan Edwards preached "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in Enfield, Connecticut, in 1741, men clung to the pews

because they felt the ground giving way beneath them. When Evan Roberts preached in Wales in 1904 and 1905, entire communities were brought to their knees in conviction of their sin before revival brought overwhelming joy!

In every case, the pattern was the same. The Law of God, faithfully proclaimed, first terrified and guilt-ridden the people, but, followed by grace, gave peace. The holiness of God was set forth in clarity, and sinners were stripped of every excuse, and only then did the free grace and mercy of the Gospel shine with its full light.

We should not be surprised by this. It is precisely the pattern the Holy Spirit uses because it is the pattern of God's own Word. Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up" before he cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:1,5). Peter saw the miraculous catch of fish and fell at Jesus' knees crying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). The jailer at Philippi fell trembling before Paul and Silas and cried, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). In every case, an overwhelming sense of God's holiness preceded the glad reception of the Gospel. The Law always arrives before the Gospel. It is the herald that prepares the way.

A Word to the Church

If this book has accomplished its purpose, it has not only helped the believer walk more faithfully in obedience to God's commandments. It has also, this author hopes, helped the Church recover a sense of what those commandments are for, not only in the life of the Christian, but in the proclamation of the Gospel to the lost.

We live in an age that is desperately uncomfortable with the idea of a holy and righteous God who demands an accounting. Our culture has fashioned a god who is endlessly tolerant, easily satisfied, and wholly incapable of judgmental wrath. This god asks nothing and forgives everything, automatically and without conditions. He is, to borrow Chantry's language, a god of our own synthetic making. And the gospel that flows from this imagined god is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is something else altogether, a comfortable message for comfortable people who see no pressing need to flee from anything.

The Ten Commandments, faithfully preached and applied, shatter this comfortable illusion. They confront the sinner with the God who actually is, the God of Sinai, the God who wrote His moral

demands on stone, the God whose holiness is a consuming fire and whose justice will not leave the guilty unpunished. They show the sinner not only what God requires but how far short every human being falls of that requirement. They close every mouth and stop every excuse. They leave the sinner nowhere to run but to the cross.

And that is precisely where we want him. The One who demanded perfect obedience provided it in His Son. The One whose justice required payment made that payment Himself. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). The very Law that condemns us in its demands is satisfied in its penalties by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the glorious exchange at the heart of the Christian Gospel, and it can only be fully appreciated by those who have first felt the weight of what they owed.

A Final Appeal

To the pastor and the teacher who reads these pages: do not be ashamed of the Law of God. Do not soften its demands for fear of offending your hearers. Remember, as image bearers, each person has a conscience. Each person, whether suppressed or not, knows right from wrong.[75] Do not skip past the commandments to reach comfort. Let the Law do its appointed work. Preach it fully, apply it honestly, and trust the Holy Spirit to use it as He always has, to break hard hearts, to expose hidden sins, and to drive desperate sinners to the only Savior who has ever lived.

To the believer who reads these pages: carry the Law with you into your witness. When you speak to a friend, neighbor, or family member about the Gospel, begin where Jesus began with the rich young ruler. Begin with the commandments. Ask them how they are doing with the God who made them. Let the Law create the thirst before you offer the water.

And to the seeker who has come to these pages still outside a saving relationship with Jesus Christ: the commandments you have read in this book are not your enemy. They are your most faithful friend, because they tell you the truth about yourself that no one else will. You have broken them. Every last one of them, in thought or word or deed, in what you have done and in what you have left undone. You cannot stand before the holy God of Sinai and make any claim

[75] This is the Apostle Paul's reasoning in Romans chapter one where we read that man is without excuse for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God (Romans 1:21). Dear reader we were created to know our Creator. Mankind may suppress this fact and denounce truth but deep down in the heart of hearts knows God exists. This is because God's image can never be fully extinguished in us.

to righteousness. But that is not the end of the story. It is, in fact, the very beginning of the good news. Because the God who gave the Law also gave His Son. And His Son kept every commandment perfectly, bore every penalty completely, and rose from the dead triumphantly, so that every sinner who comes to Him in genuine repentance and faith might be clothed in His righteousness and welcomed into the family of God. This is amazing grace!

That call to come to Christ goes out to all. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts…” (Psalm 95:7-8).

May the God who gave us His holy Law be the God of the Gospel for every reader of this book.

May the commandments that have shown us our sin drive us afresh to the cross of Jesus, where that sin was fully and finally dealt with. And may the Church of Jesus Christ recover in our day the proclamation of Law and Gospel that has, in every age of genuine awakening, been the instrument the Holy Spirit has used to bring dead sinners to life.

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24-25).

"Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold” (Psalm 119:127).